The Mongolian Chronicles

A Story of Eagles, Demons, and Empires

ALLEN SMUTYLO

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GOOSE LANE EDITIONS

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For Gayle

Golden Eagle, 2019, watercolour, 14 x 10.5 inches

Inside of me there are two dogs. One is mean and evil and the other is good, and they fight each other all the time. When asked which one wins, I answer, "The one I feed the most."

— Author unknown

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Compadres, 2018, watercolour, 12 x 21 inches

Introduction

I've spent most of my adult life going to remote places. What I find and experience there is what I try to convey through my artwork or writing, or both. I'm regularly asked why or how I go about choosing a particular place. Apart from it being off the beaten track and/or having an interesting culture, I'm not really sure.

I don't do a lot of pre-trip reading about a place — that usually comes after. Discovering the unexpected is an important ingredient in my work, acting as a motivator: I want the surprise. A simple word or phrase often triggers the initial interest to go somewhere. "Paddling with icebergs" inspired the first of several expeditions to Greenland, even though I had never sea kayaked before. Or "Nomads of the Himalaya"; that is, bands of people living in tents, wandering around in one of the world's most extreme environments. Or "Funeral pyres on the Ganges" — one of the most sacred places on Earth, as well as one of the most fouled. The juxtaposition of the uncommon, combining extremes, seems to have an irresistible draw for me.

The allure of Mongolia falls into that category. It is a land of contradictions and extremes: parched and sun-scorched in summer and minus fifty and snowbound in winter. A capital city skyline profiles a hundred gleaming high-rises, intermixed with a ghetto of two hundred thousand canvas tents. A country dominated by vast tracts of virgin wilderness but with one of the most polluted cities on Earth. A citizenry that has developed an appetite for bistros, smart phones, and Western fashions but often looks to shamans for answers to life's questions. An economy focused on voraciously gnawing out the nation's natural resources, while above ground, nomads shepherd their sheep and goats to mountain slopes to graze on stunted grass.

As a place name, Mongolia resides somewhere deep in the corners of our human consciousness. Whether you've been there or not, its name carries a disquiet, like a wolf pack's howl or the sound of rolling thunder or the cadence of a shaman's

drum. As a country and as a synonym it is associated with the ends of the Earth: wild, remote, mysterious, and threatening. But beyond that, my interest to journey there was activated by a single phrase: “Eagle-hunting nomads.”

In the shadow of the Altai Mountains, along Mongolia’s western border, is the isolated home of an ethnic people called Kazakhs. These hard-living nomads have survived on these windswept steppes, by their wits and with their animals, for millennia. Although the Kazakhs are mostly pastoralists, just as their forbears, they are also hunters of wild animals. It was sixteen years ago that I first heard of the extraordinary method they use to hunt their prey: not with dogs, or rifles, or bows and arrows, or leghold traps but on horseback with huge golden eagles. At first, I thought this must be something from the distant past or a wilderness legend, like the sasquatch elusively roaming the high Himalayas. When I discovered that it was in fact true, I added Mongolian eagle hunters to my “need to see some day” list.

That “someday” happened in the fall of 2016. As I prepared to leave for Mongolia, my focus was on eagle hunting only. This was *the* story I planned to depict in my artwork. And I wasn’t disappointed: golden eagles on the arms of nomads on horseback, riding along snow-clad mountain ridges — the visual “wow factor” was certainly there. But that singular emphasis changed, or at least widened. The door I opened into the world of eagle hunters lead not to a singular room but rather into a sizeable house, and its multiple rooms and levels revealed other themes and subjects that motivated my return to West Mongolia a year later.

. . .

The golden eagle, one of the largest raptors in the world, interested me all by itself. I knew these magnificent birds were not classified as endangered or even as rare, yet they were far from common. In all my travels, I’d never spotted one. A friend who is a professional ornithologist assured me that a golden eagle sighting, at any time and any place, is especially noteworthy.

I’ve learned that in the West, and in other places in the

world, falconers have on rare occasions trained and used golden eagles, but most regard the bird as too difficult and dangerous to groom as a surrogate hunter. This eagle is a true recluse, steadfastly intolerant of sharing its habitat with people — a fact that makes its relationship with Kazakh falconers all the more remarkable.

I also learned that in Western falconry an inordinate amount of patience is required to bond with and control any wild raptor. Taking on this sort of concentrated effort and daily expenditure of time demands some degree of financial security, or at least flexibility in one's work life. So I found it hard to fathom how Mongolian nomads, already leading a precarious existence, could accommodate such a time-consuming sport. That question was quickly answered in West Mongolia. I saw that the passion nomads had for their hunting eagles was infused into their culture and that their relationship with the sport went well beyond any monetary or time constraint. A couple of the older hunters confided to me that hunting with their eagles had long since veered from an enjoyable pastime to what they regarded as an addiction.

I increasingly came to see this human-eagle relationship as a highly complex, compelling, and baffling liaison, and something beyond an association with hunting. Cultures ancient and new, primitive and sophisticated — from the ancient civilizations of Mexico to the north-dwelling Siberians, from the Indigenous tribes of the Midwest to the Nazis in Germany — have all allied themselves with this reclusive bird. When it comes to symbolizing an empire or nation or tribe, no animal has been hijacked more often than the eagle. Its likeness can be found on coins, paper currencies, flags, coats of arms, postage stamps, totem poles, war bonnets, bronze statues, military lapel pins, Indigenous staffs, shaman masks, presidential seals, and petroglyphs. But why? Why have we appropriated this particular bird and anointed it with such status? Is its symbolic usage an insight into the nature of the eagle? Some sort of conduit to the heavens? Or is the bird used as our amulet to imbue us with its predatory power? I wondered if it could be anything but a commentary on us, on how we see, or wish to see, our own status — above and beyond everything else.

My eagle-hunting sojourn also awakened the well-worn and contentious issue of killing wild animals for sport. Anthrozoologically speaking, the nomads' practice of using these birds of prey — co-opting the search-and-destroy instincts to do a human's bidding — is unusual. Humans exploiting animals is hardly unique but using a wild predator to kill for us certainly is.

Within days of first being in Mongolia, I realized that it's impossible to give even a cursory view of this country without recognizing the lingering presence of Genghis Khan. Mongolia is eight centuries removed from when it was the centre of a vast empire, yet the legend of the Great Khan and his Mongols continues to cast a long shadow across Mongolian society — and perhaps for good reason. His story, from a humble beginning to continental pre-eminence, is practically unparalleled in the pantheon of empire builders.

In the middle of the twelfth century, the "civilized" world (i.e., Europeans) had almost no knowledge of Mongolia or its inhabitants. And why would they? The steppes of Central Asia would have been as distant and removed from their world as the craters of the moon. At most, Europeans would have been aware of Mongolia as a desolate place, sparsely populated with illiterate sheep herders who lived in tents. Yet, two generations later, every living soul across the breadth of Europe and Asia came to know, loathe, and fear the word *Mongol* (or *Tartar*) and the name of their leader, Genghis Khan. He and his kin, with their mounted warriors, succeeded in overrunning, subjugating, and then effectively administering a hundred million people across two continents, encompassing multiple religions, languages, and cultures. The legend of Genghis Khan is so pervasive that, for most of us, the sum total of what we know of Mongolia starts and ends with him.

And yet beyond his rule, the country has a past that is rich and varied. Just as the 1300s was the high watermark in Mongolian history, the 1900s was equally noteworthy for the opposite reason. From 1918 to 1993, the surrounding empires whiplashed the Mongolians through a governing gauntlet that went from feudalism to communism to capitalism, all within one life span. In retrospect, it's a miracle that, at the end of the twentieth century, Mongolia had survived to become an

independent country.

Mongolian Steppes, 2017, mixed media, 12 x 16 inches

One common and recurring theme that surfaces through centuries, and was borne out in my own experience, is the pervasive belief among Mongolians in the power of shamans. Influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, mixed with Lamaism (a branch of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine that contains non-Buddhist elements), stirred with pagan rituals and the ancient Bon religion, challenged by Islam, pressured by Christian missionaries, outlawed by the Soviets, and buffeted by the secularism of modernity — the country's faith in the shaman nevertheless endured. Even today, the ancient practice of shamanism remains an integral part of what it is to be Mongolian.

Over the last thirty-eight years I've witnessed and documented a number of places where a traditional way of life is on a collision course with modernity. I entered the eagle hunters' world in present-day time, but it wasn't hard to glimpse that a precarious future waited up ahead. How can people who live in tents, heated with dung at minus-forty temperatures, and shepherd animals on a semi-frozen land resist the material comforts of city life, particularly when their environment is delivering colder winters and hotter summers that are now drying up lakes, rivers, and streams?

A far-off place, a magnificent bird, and a handful of rugged

and determined nomads inspired this book. Captivating as this amalgam is, it led me down other unexpected paths where more mercurial thoughts and questions emerged — not the least of which concerns how we, as humans, interact with the natural world and how we interact with each other.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Land of Golden Eagles

Her flight across the valley was purposeful. Fresh prey was firmly held in her talons. Soaring northward, she left the southern edge of her territory, heading back to the nest. The golden eagle knew she was too high to be noticed by the hobbled male below. She had flown over the year-old eagle a number of times before. She had heard the cries of the captured bird and used her keen sight to examine him. There was no doubt that this was hers. Exactly why it was, week after week, flapping and flailing on a mountaintop with nothing around it except a dead rabbit, she didn't know. Even seeing it struggle and hearing its incessant cries, the parental bond was no longer there. Curiosity was overridden by a sense that something was amiss. With a strong instinct to stay clear, she flew on.

She and her mate had abandoned their previous year's nest after the disappearance of the eaglet. They relocated to a secondary aerie much farther into the Altai Mountains. It was situated below a snowcapped ledge along the upper face of a steep precipice, ten kilometres from the previous site.

Her mate waited for her at the nest. The female's loft slowed, and she braked with the flanking of her huge wings. After landing and a brief head-bob greeting to her mate, she silenced the eaglet's cries by pulling a piece of flesh from the marmot she was carrying and placing it into the yawning gullet.

We had long since left any semblance of a roadway. Our van rumbled and lurched over the rough terrain, sometimes following and sometimes diverging from the various tracks of bent grass. My transport was a UAZ-452 van, an iconic piece of Soviet engineering that has remained mostly unchanged in fifty years — essentially a heavy metal box on four wheels. In Russia, given the vehicle's rectangular profile, they affectionately refer to the UAZ-452 as *Bukhanka*, meaning "loaf of bread." When I asked my driver for an assessment of his beast, he proclaimed, with a raised thumb and a head nod, "Tis da best!" Shortly after starting out we had passed a Toyota Land Cruiser with its hood up on the side of the road. My

driver turned to me with a laugh and a flick of his wrist. “Haaa . . . Japanese . . . tis crap.”

I soon discovered that the van’s cushioned ceiling was less of a frill and more of a necessity, given the vehicle’s locked-in frame, lack of shock absorbers or seat belts, and the wild terrain we were travelling. Ruts and paths left by animal hooves and vehicle wheels criss-crossed everywhere over the steppes. These convoluted memories of travel separated, joined, separated, and then often joined again. My driver had a death grip on the wheel, constantly leaning forward, assessing and trying to differentiate the paths before him as an alien might interpret crop circles. What I saw was an endless sea of sparse, knee-high grasses, with the occasional erratic deposit and some outcroppings of silt, sand, and stony rubble. Towards the horizon, the trails petered out as the grasslands ended and the grade steepened into a ragged-edged blockade of granite, snow, and ice. With limited vegetation to offer soil-holding roots, the snow and glacier melt from the surrounding mountains carved ragged scars across the terrain.

I was travelling across the isolated *aimag* (province) called Bayan-Ölgii. It was the fall of 2016, and I had just landed in this country’s western frontier, after a three-hour flight from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia’s capital. This *aimag* is sandwiched between Russia to the north and China to the south. It is the homeland to ethnic Muslim Kazakhs (the country of Kazakhstan is just off the western corner of Mongolia), whose customs are distinctive from the rest of Tibetan Buddhist Mongolia. With my driver and interpreter, I was en route to my first homestay with an eagle hunter and his family. This seldom-visited area is one of the last places on Earth where the ancient tradition of nomads hunting with golden eagles still takes place.

Mongolia is one of the most remote countries on the planet. A quick look at a map shows how its topography and geography have been major factors in Mongolia’s isolation. It sits in the centre of Asia and is the largest country in the world without ocean or inland sea access. The snow-capped Altai Mountains line its western boundary, while the Hangayn Nuruu range blocks off the north and the Hentiyn Nuruu Mountains ring the northeast; across its southeast frontier lies the immense

Gobi Desert.

Mongolia spans over 2,500 kilometres east to west and is more than twice the size of Afghanistan and three times the size of France. On average the country is 1,750 metres above sea level. Hot summers, cold winters, fierce winds, and periods of sustained drought give this area its steppe classification. Any drier and it would be a desert; any wetter and it would technically be prairie. This harsh climate makes great swaths of Mongolia incapable of supporting agriculture of any kind.

The Mongolia-Siberia border to the north is lined with a boreal forest tree cover. But to the south, where I was, there are no trees. Rather, the terrain is predominately covered in a wild flora: a scrub-grass mix of wormwood, sheep's fescue, feather grass, tumbleweed, and sagebrush — land better suited to animals than people, although even animals often struggle to live here. As we drove I found the near total absence of people and their constructs striking. If golden eagles preferred a solitary preponderance of wilderness, this was the place. Only a thin scattering of nomadic herders cares to call this terrain home.

As we travelled farther we came across sheep and goats, some smaller groupings of yaks and camels, and occasionally herds of horses. Dotting the grassland plains were the circular white *gers* (yurt-like tents) that are the domiciles of the nomads and the occasional flat-roofed mud hut, with a low entryway and tiny windows. Given their appearance of disrepair, it was hard to tell if these huts were lived in or abandoned. We passed near a cemetery, ringed by fencing, which had a surprisingly large number of graves.

The late-day air was exceptionally clear and bright, absent any atmospheric haze. As the sun descended, the barren landscape began to be cast in a burnished glow. It was late September and the grasses had already changed from green to tawny and into the shades of season's end. When the sun slid behind the ridge of mountains, the earth tones deepened into rich shades of mauve and violet. Horizontal bands of cobalt clouds contrasted the dirty peach sky that gradually transitioned into a pale cerulean. It was a beautiful and lonesome land.

After four hours of non-stop travel, stars began to appear in

a frigid night sky. Half an hour later we were rocking and rolling through total darkness. With grinding gears and some frantic wheel-turning, we zigzagged through a minefield of potholes, boulders, knee-high grasses, marmot burrows, frozen puddles, streams, riverbanks, rock outcroppings, and sandpits that appeared in our headlights and disappeared back into the night. With no seat belts in the back seat (or anywhere else), I was tossed about like a rag doll inside the vehicle's metal frame. Now and again, in the extreme toing and froing, I let go a maniacal laugh as our driver navigated land without roads. Other times my back simply cried out for mercy. After five hours of travelling the empty washboard obstacle course, I began to ask myself: where the hell do these eagle guys live, anyway?

Our careening box of steel negotiated yet another steep grade, and then suddenly, with a clunk and a shudder, it came to a stop on a precipitous slope. Ahhh . . . stillness . . . silence. At first I didn't know why we had stopped and then — with the help of the van's headlights — I made out a small, low, stone hovel with a few other oddly shaped pens and mangers built around it. From the darkness of a corral a hundred animal eyes were fixed on us. It was ten thirty p.m. With the headlights turned off, a barely visible light emanated from the structure's tiny window. This was the winter home of the first eagle hunter I would be staying with. Getting out of the van, I stretched and gazed up at the night sky. It pulsated with a vast sea of cosmic energy. By contrast, the land appeared to be a complete void, as if I were entering a black hole in outer space.

EAGLE ON A MOUNTAIN

> *You must come back to see me again. If you do, I will find you a good wife.*
>
> — Beken

Beken Ermekbay, the eagle hunter, and his wife, Saule, lived together with their son, Ergen, his young wife, Gadira, and their newborn baby, Nurali. Almost all the people who lived in this *aimag*, like Beken and his family, as well as the driver and my interpreter, Peka, were Kazakh, their religion and language differing from the rest of Mongolia.

Saule already had a table set with food for us. A single low-watt bulb connected to a solar-powered battery illuminated the kitchen. The home was sparse but spotlessly clean. A small dung-burning stove was their sole means for cooking and warming the place.

Beken and his family had just moved into this dwelling for the winter. They lived in their *gers* during spring, summer, and fall months and moved into their more substantial stone or cement-walled structure for the winter. I found out, however, that some nomads remain in their *gers* year-round. Nomads move to new locations a number of times a year. For the nomads to support themselves, every family needs to raise and tend a large number of animals. Given the land's limited vegetation, this requires substantial grazing areas. When their animals graze out a locale they must relocate, sometimes moving as much as a hundred kilometres. These moves are not willy-nilly or random; every nomad family has a predetermined set of locations that they rotate through yearly and are regarded as their own. As with many of the nomads, Beken's nearest neighbour lived two or three kilometres away. Beken shared his family's herding duties with that family, with a combined herd of 150 goats, 100 sheep, 20 yaks and cows, and 5 horses.

After the late-night meal and some getting-to-know-one-another conversation, everyone was tired and ready for bed. My driver departed for the arduous drive back to Ölgii. Ergen, his wife, and their newborn slept in a room off the kitchen. Beken, Saule, and my interpreter, Peka, slept in another room. I slept on the floor in an area that connected their bedroom to the kitchen. Saule brought out a pile of blankets and furs for bedding, but I had come with my own sleeping bag.

Just before bed, I went out to brush my teeth and pee. After the warmth of the kitchen the outside felt like a walk-in freezer. I was immediately greeted in the darkness by loud whining. My flashlight illuminated a black cat with its ears frozen off. It rubbed against my pant leg as light snow fell, dappling the rock-hard ground. I tucked into my sleeping bag that night thinking of outdoor cats in a land patrolled by golden eagles.

. . .

I awoke to the sound of Saule in the kitchen starting their little dung-burning stove. She was a petite woman, slightly bent, with an unwaveringly sunny disposition. Her age was hard to tell. Her face had a youthful look, lacking the lines and wrinkles that normally come with aging.

Her husband was already outside doing his morning chores. Beken was fifty-four, tall, strong, and lanky, with sloped shoulders, a long, loping stride, and an appetite for hard work. At a young age, he had been taught by his father and grandfather to be an eagle hunter, and he had spent the last thirty-two years immersed in the world of golden eagles. It was a tradition, he said, that went back ten generations in his family. Over his lifetime, Beken had captured sixty eagles. He said twenty were successfully trained and the others were either sold, deemed untrainable, or died. Mostly he captured and trained eagles for himself, but occasionally other nomad hunters came to obtain eagles from him.

From the get-go, when trying to communicate with me, Beken would bypass the interpreter and instead turn and face me directly, looking deep into my eyes. After a brief pause he would give a little series of head nods, often holding up a number of fingers, while saying nothing, his eyes still riveted on mine, as if using mental telepathy to transfer his thoughts directly to me. I found this wondrously funny as I commenced guessing what the hell he was trying to tell me. Peka, my interpreter, translated my guesses to Beken. He would then, more often than not, shake his head and answer with even more intense staring and baffling finger messages. His strange sign language triggered great bouts of laughter from around the kitchen table, except from Beken, who fought to remain straight-faced. I liked Beken a lot.

Beken with grandchild

It wasn't until mid-afternoon, after Beken's chores were finished, that I got the opportunity to be introduced to his golden eagle. By that time, the anticipation was nearly killing me. I knew the bird was kept in a windowless, low-stone-walled storage shed with a ten-centimetre opening above its bolted wooden door. I had passed in front of the shed earlier that morning and heard loud shrieks from within, like the sound of a rusty hinge, greatly amplified. Whether it was a greeting or alarm or warning, I don't know, but the eagle's cries seemed reserved only for my passing. I later learned that the golden eagle isn't regarded as a particularly vocal bird. Over time, however, I was able to differentiate between its contented "wok, wok, wok" and the irritated shrill scream that I heard that morning.

Beken disappeared into the pitch-black hut as I waited outside. A few minutes later he brought out the eagle on his right arm. He took off her fitted leather hood and repeatedly stroked her head with his left hand. All the while he was softly talking to her as if she were the family cat. The bird immediately bobbed her head back and forth while fixing her large eyes on me with a penetrating stare. Of the many things that surprised me about golden eagles and eagle hunting, the

first was the bird's size and powerful build. Golden eagles vary in size and colour, depending on their location; the golden eagles of Central Asia are the largest in the world, while Japan's golden eagles are the smallest.

Female eagles (called *burkit*), I learned, are far preferred to males, and for hunting large game only the female will do. They are 40 per cent larger than males (called *sarsha*) and as such are more powerful and more aggressive. Although females are generally better hunters, Beken reminded me that every eagle is different in disposition, personality, and temperament — crucial traits that a hunter needs to consider in assessing an eagle's hunting potential. Some golden eagles, even for an experienced trainer such as Beken, are untrainable or simply too unpredictably dangerous to be around.

The eagle hunters don't give their raptors pet names. On rare occasions, they will identify their birds by a particular coloration or a distinctive marking, but more commonly they describe their eagles by age: first year — *balapan*; second — *tirnek*; third — *tastulek*; fourth — *ana*; fifth — *hana*, and so on up to the age of ten. At first this struck me as somewhat distant and impersonal. In my culture, the first thing we do when we care for an animal is give it its own distinctive name. Yet on further reflection, the fact that eagle hunters categorize and differentiate ten separate growth stages in their eagles is actually far more nuanced than the growth classifications we give our own youth.

At five years of age, Beken's raptor had just reached the age of maturity. The lifespan of a golden eagle in the wild is roughly forty years, although in captivity some have reached eighty years of age.

The "golden" part of the bird's name comes from the amber-coloured hackles at the nape of its neck. Beken's eagle had chest feathers in muted shades of burnt sienna and umber. They were lighter and warmer than the primary and secondary wing feathers, which ranged from charcoal blue to blackish wine. As the eagle matures, it slowly loses much of the white on its underwing feathers and on its twelve large tail feathers, although small flecks of white usually remain. Worldwide, these tail feathers are highly prized; however, most countries officially prohibit the marketing and sale of golden eagle

feathers. In North America, eagle feathers are legally obtainable only within the Indigenous community, and their distribution is carefully regulated. (Of course, an active black market operates out of China and elsewhere.)

The big, round, reptilian eyes of Beken's eagle were chestnut brown in colour, but that too can vary. The bird's impressive mandible was about half the length of its head and had a decisive down-turned hook at the end. The beak transitioned from faded yellow, to ice blue, to black at the outer tip. The outline of the mouth, top and bottom, was bright yellow. Two yellow claws, covered in what looked like crocodile scales, emerged from her feathered legs. Each of her four toes was equipped with a long black talon that clung to the heavy leather elbow-length glove, resembling a welding mitt, that Beken wore on his right hand. Both of the bird's legs were shackled with leather cuffs to which a long strand of leather twine was attached and that Beken held.

Beken insisted that I hold the bird. I slipped on his thick leather glove and then, moments later, felt the eagle's heavy weight and the vice-like grip of its talons. She immediately took on a nervous countenance, sensing something was very different. As for me, I was mostly calm — but only because her eyes were covered.

That afternoon I was given a demonstration of the two methods most commonly used to train a golden eagle. In the first exercise, Beken simply placed the eagle on raised ground about fifty metres away and then called it to come to his extended arm. His glove held a small piece of raw meat, the reward for obeying. The second exercise, from the same fifty-metre distance, involved dragging a length of bundled fox fur tied to a long rope across the ground, mimicking a running fox or marmot and enticing the eagle to attack. In both exercises the eagle flew untethered. A reward of raw rabbit meat always followed a successful performance.

Beken said his current bird was the best female eagle he had ever had, an extremely aggressive and highly confident hunter. To demonstrate the eagle's awareness and intelligence, Beken removed his glove. The eagle's razor-like talons held on to his bare forearm but with such gentleness as to not leave a mark. Beken said this was something he had never experienced before

with any other eagle.

. . .

During that first day, and again the following morning, Beken frequently looked across the valley towards a distant mountaintop using a pair of old binoculars that had broken in two. Using one half as a spyglass, he would peer for a couple of minutes through the lens. Finally, he said there was something on the far side of the valley he wanted to show me. On horseback, we proceeded down the slope to the valley floor, crossed the river, and then ascended the far mountainside slope.

At the bottom of a high, steep-walled cliff, Beken stopped and pointed out an old golden eagle's nest two-thirds of the way up. He said he had obtained an eaglet from there by lowering a child on a rope from the top of the cliff down to the nest when the bird's parents were absent. After capturing the eaglet with a burlap bag, the child was pulled back up the cliff. The parents abandoned that particular nest the year after the eaglet-napping. Ideally, Beken said, an eaglet taken from the nest should be about two months old. Beken explained that if you take the eagle from the nest too young they lack the wildness and aggression that is required to hunt. If you wait much longer, they will have fledged and left the nest.

We proceeded, riding along the mid-level slope of the mountainside, slowly ascending. It was bitterly cold, with a fresh north wind blowing. Snow was falling on the higher peaks. Even so, Beken wore only a well-worn sports coat, open, over a few shirts, and he had a little, narrow-brimmed tweed cap on his head. He wore no gloves. He could have passed for an eccentric country golfer on the links of Scotland.

When we arrived at the rise of the mountain I did a double take. Hobbled by a three-metre rope tied to one leg was a blackish-coloured golden eagle. When the bird saw us, it went berserk, with an incessant piercing cry, wildly thrashing about, trying desperately to fly away. Even Beken couldn't calm it down. Through Peka's translation, Beken told me this was his one-year-old male eagle. Peka and I were both taken aback when it was further explained that the bird was simply a lure

to catch another golden eagle, a more valued hunting female. As enticement for a female eagle, a short distance from the young male was a dead rabbit that Beken had positioned as a decoy. The prop was made to look as much as possible as though it were running. The male wasn't meant to be a sexual attraction for the female. Instead, the idea was that a female eagle would spot the male — smaller and less powerful — and push it off the "kill." Beside the rabbit, Beken showed us a snare just below the soil that he hoped would catch the female eagle when it flew in to investigate. The trap was spring-loaded but designed so as not to injure the eagle. When the eagle's weight triggered the trap, it would collapse inward, grabbing the legs, and throw a net that would envelop the entire bird, wings and all. I had to admit it was an ingenious invention. But even though I knew Beken was very experienced in this sort of thing, I somehow couldn't envision the apparatus securing a huge, frantic eagle.

Young Male, 2016, mixed media, 10 x 13.5 inches

He came to feed the young male eagle every other day, or whenever his spyglass told him that the trap had been sprung. From his satchel Beken took out some raw rabbit meat, and he tossed it on the ground next to the bird. The eagle ignored it at first and continued to thrash around wildly before it finally calmed down enough to eat. The contrast between Beken's two eagles couldn't have been greater.

Beken characterized his captive as simply “crazy,” and I thought, *Yeah, well, who wouldn’t be, all alone and tethered to a mountaintop?* Beken spent some time with the rabbit decoy, trying to get its little ears to stand up straight for a livelier look, but with the snow continuing to fall and wind whipping around us, he finally gave a shrug of his shoulders to the dead animal’s uncooperative ears, and we made our way back down the mountain.

On the way back to his house, I privately rated the chances of Beken’s trickery actually catching a wild female golden eagle alive as zero.

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The relationship Beken had with his female eagle was amazing. He was part trainer, part protector, part jailer, part friend, part nurse, and part hunting companion. But, unlike the breaking of a wild horse, for example, the eagle’s training isn’t intended to result in domestication and subordination, at least not completely. Although the eagle becomes dependent on its owner, it still needs to retain its wildness, its spirit, and its innate courage to hunt relatively large animals with a high degree of proficiency. It’s a union with a common bond — the eagle and eagle hunter are both working towards a shared goal: a successful hunt.

Among the Kazakh nomads in Mongolia, eagle hunting is done in the winter months only. This is when the hunters have more time to spare, the pelts and furs are thicker, and the spring’s newborn animals — the potential prey — are close to full-grown. (The sale of the hides and furs of wolves and foxes is officially prohibited. The hunters’ wives fashion them into hats and coats.) The winter-only hunt is a long-held tradition that goes back to ancient times. Genghis Khan himself issued severe penalties to anyone who hunted out of season.

Hunting with eagles in Mongolia is always done on horseback. While riding, the eagle sits on the hunter’s right-gloved forearm and is cradled by a small wooden crutch (*baldakh*) that attaches to the saddle. The eagle hunter will take a route with a high vantage point, often along a cliff or mountain ridge. Western Mongolia’s treeless steppes, with their

open sightlines, are well suited for this method of hunting. The mountain height gives a viewing advantage, and perhaps more importantly, attacking from above is always the golden eagle's preference. If the eagle is calm enough to ride without its hood (*tomaga*) and has the trust of the hunter, they may look for quarry together, given that the eagle has far better eyesight. Otherwise the hunter will remove the hood when he spots something. After releasing the eagle, the hunter will ride as fast as possible towards what is being hunted. When the prey is a fox or wolf, the objective of the hunter is to arrive on the scene and kill the prey as quickly as possible to avert a prolonged tussle and prevent the bird from being injured or killed. Also, the hunter wants to save the pelt before it's damaged. Traditionally, after the animal has been killed, a piece of the quarry, usually the leg, is immediately given to the eagle as a reward. If more than one eagle is involved in the attack, the dead animal goes to the owner of the eagle deemed responsible for the kill.

The time and effort needed to break an eagle of some of its inherent wildness is considerable. After that, one needs to create a relationship in which the eagle is a companion to the hunter, a process that can take many weeks or months. Food plays a large role in the bird's transition. Hungry, tethered, and desperate, the eagle learns that to survive it has no choice but to rely on the hunter for food. The feeding gradually reduces its agitation, counters its instinct to flee, and fosters a dependent relationship with the hunter.

Training a wild golden eagle is like walking a tightrope. The hunter must retain much of the eagle's aggressiveness and its attacking instincts while at the same time controlling some of its wildness. The eagle must also become habituated to the hunter and his children, and to his horses and dogs. This balance, between human cooperation and the golden eagle's inherent wildness, is delicate and precarious. It is a trait that is impossible to attain if, for example, you start with an egg from the nest and incubate it, or if you take an eaglet that is very young, or if you use an eaglet from captive parents in a zoo. On the other hand, a captured golden eagle that has fully matured will usually have too many ingrained wild behaviours to be successfully trained to hunt with people.

After seeing all the effort and time Beken invested in his golden eagle, I wondered why. Mongolian nomads live the very definition of a hard life. The workload is enormous. Apart from the effort required to relocate a half-dozen times a year, they have a hundred or more animals to nurse, herd, milk, shear, and slaughter, with all that that entails. And they do so absent the many modern-day technologies that would lessen their workload.

At one time, before the introduction of the rifle, training an eagle to obtain furs and food would have been practical, if not a necessity, for the subsistence survival of a nomadic steppe family. But with the availability of warm store-bought clothes and access to abundant sources of protein from livestock, the effort involved in obtaining, training, and caring for an eagle didn't seem to square with the benefits. Anyway, what were the benefits? Some hobby falconers in the West, writing about hawking, talk of the joy or the sadness they experience vicariously through their birds after witnessing either a successful or a failed hunt — as you would watching your child win or lose a sporting competition.* When I asked Beken why he does it, he replied that being with eagles is good for his health. "I can't describe the pleasure in hunting. There is a feeling of freedom. I forget all my troubles and what was bothering me when I'm with my eagle."

As people who feed birds know, it doesn't take much time or effort to have a chickadee eating seeds out of your hand. These brief moments that connect people with animals in the wild are infrequent, but when they happen, they leave a wonderful feeling and a lasting memory.

Of course, I know those interactions are based on food and not some sort of anthropomorphic friendship. An animal's trust comes from observation and incremental testing of what is safe and what isn't. In the chickadee's case, as with most intelligent animals, it comes from the bird's impressive ability to perform a relatively quick risk-reward calculation.

When I compare my fleeting chickadee-feeding moments to an eagle hunter's years-long relationship with his powerful raptor, it gives some perspective on the depth of the connection Beken must experience. I can only partly imagine the sensation: a golden eagle — the very definition of wild freedom, with its

two-and-a-half-metre wing span and lethal weaponry — coming to you, landing on your arm when you call. And then, at a time and place of your choosing, you send it off into the wild to do your bidding, to kill for you.

After a five-day stay with Beken's family, I was scheduled to be picked up by a driver and taken to stay with another nomadic hunter. As Peka and I waited for our van to arrive, I wandered across Beken's mountain hillside photographing landforms, including a large rock-slab petroglyph that Beken had earlier pointed out. A wet snow had been falling all morning, and the moisture left the various human, animal, and abstract designs on the rock surface beautifully accentuated.

After an hour of wandering around I realized I had misplaced my camera's lens cap. I retraced my steps back and forth for half an hour to no avail. The ground had a covering of wet snow, leaving the rock-strewn terrain speckled in blotches of black and white, making a small black lens cap impossible to spot. When I returned to the house I mentioned the loss to Peka, who told Beken. He wanted to go out and look for it, but I insisted that he not bother. I told him I had walked a long way, and with the current snowy conditions my tracks were now obscured — it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Shortly after, saying he had some chores to tend to, Beken put on his boots and went outside. Twenty minutes later he returned and handed me the lens cap. I sat in silence for a minute, trying to comprehend how he could have found it. I thanked and complimented him, by adding that he had his eagle's eyes. He gave me his long penetrative stare, then nodded slightly and smiled.

EAGLE EYE

The eyesight of eagles is what thought is to man.
— Dejan Stojanovic, *The Creator*

An eagle's eyes are indeed one of the bird's most amazing assets. They are large, deep-set, and powered telescopically, enabling it to detect a minute movement from a two-kilometre distance. Its vision is said to be eight times more acute than that of humans. Not only do they see farther, but they see more

sharply and focus their eyes more quickly over a wider field of vision. The maximum temporal resolution that the human brain can comprehend is twenty-five distinguishable images per second. By contrast, a golden eagle can recognize and comprehend 150 images per second. This means that even when it and the prey it is chasing are in very rapid motion, the eagle's eyes can stay locked in on its quarry.

Similar to the flesh-eating velociraptor of *Jurassic Park* fame, eagles have both monocular and binocular vision. The eagle's monocular vision gives it the ability to look at a distant object through one eye and to magnify it, like looking through a telescope. Once the object is located, its eyes will adjust to binocular vision (combining an image from each eye) to give an accurate depth of field, thus pinpointing the object's distance.

Eagle Study #2, 2016, mixed media, 10.5 x 14 inches

The eyes of eagles and all birds are sensitive to a wider spectrum of light, able to see both longer and shorter wavelengths than humans do. Birds see colours that we can't, those that are inside the ultraviolet spectrum. Every square millimetre of a golden eagle's retina has a million cells, compared to two hundred thousand for the human retina.

For all but the world's largest land vertebrates, a golden eagle silhouetted against the sky is a fearsome sight. In the avian world, it has few equals; it is its pre-eminent assassin.

Apart from its eyes, the rest of its physiology helps explain why.

The golden eagle has an average standing height of roughly a metre. An enormous beak used for gashing and tearing dominates its head, and its reptilian claws are the size of a man's hand and armed with four stiletto-like talons. These abattoir meathooks, when locked in, can exert pressure at a strength of 550 pounds per square inch (the average person's grip can exert about twenty pounds per square inch).

The bird also has amazing aerobatic agility and can drop vertically out of the sky, like a Stuka dive-bomber, attacking other birds in flight. This is a manoeuvre that has been measured at over three hundred kilometres an hour, a rate of movement exceeded by only one other animal on Earth, the peregrine falcon. With its array of weaponry, the golden eagle can attack what it wants, when it wants — even prey eight times its size. By any measure, it is a spectacular killing machine.

With legs feathered all the way down to its feet, the golden eagle is classified as a booted eagle. Out of the world's sixty-nine eagle species, the golden eagle is one of the three largest and, in evolutionary terms, possibly the most successful. Fossils allow us to trace the golden eagle's lineage back to the Tertiary period, from 66 million to 2.6 million years ago. Golden eagles can be found from the Subarctic to southern Mexico, from northern Europe to the Mediterranean, from North Africa to Siberia, and all the way across Asia to Japan — in as broad a range of geographies, elevations, and climates as any other raptor (and more than any other eagle). A golden eagle can claim a hunting territory of up to two hundred square kilometres and in elevations up to five thousand metres. A mating pair will often attack and kill other birds of prey, including other eagles that enter their territory.

Golden eagles usually mate for life. Ornithologists have observed a courting behaviour that involves pendulum-swooping or sky-dancing (a series of steep dives and rapid climbs, beating its wings at the top of each rise), dropping sticks and small prey to one another while in flight, and play-chasing horses and cattle. After reaching maturity at five years of age, mating eagles will produce one or two creamy-white

eggs flecked with brown spots. Parents alternate nest-sitting, with incubation taking about forty-five days. It will take another two and a half months for the eaglets to fledge and another month to be independent. If there are two eggs, they will hatch three or four days apart, and quite frequently only one of the two eaglets will survive.

Habitually the older hatchling will bully, attack, and eventually kill or push the younger sibling out of the nest. Other times the bullied eaglet will weaken until it ceases to beg for food. The occurrence is called siblicide (or Cainism), and it occurs more commonly among golden eagles in Mongolia than any other region. Even though the brooding female is renowned for her high degree of protective nurturing, neither she nor her mate will interfere. Though this behaviour seems to contradict the species survival imperative, scientists theorize that in times of scarcity, having just one eaglet to feed gives the parents a more manageable workload. Also, they speculate that in order to ensure a successful breeding season, the second eaglet is just insurance against the first-born dying shortly after hatching. Or, I wonder, is this simply the first glimpse at the eagle's deep-seated DNA instructions? A fragile, vulnerable life triggers the bird's instinct — an overt, hard-wired impulse to attack and kill.

Golden eagles prefer to nest on an inaccessible cliff face, and if breeding is successful, they will continue to use the same nest their entire lifetime, adding sticks each year. The nests can grow to be two metres in diameter and one metre in depth, or even larger. However, if an eagle hunter removes an eaglet from an aerie, as was the case with Beken, the parents will abandon the nest in the years that follow.

Most animals restrict themselves to geographical areas where their preferred food is abundant. But the golden eagle has the aptitude to learn and calibrate its hunting techniques to fit almost any environment and many types of prey. They have the problem-solving skills to successfully hunt over two hundred different types of animals: be it rabbits in Northern Ontario, rats in India, snakes in Baja, marmots in Turkey, wild goats in the Himalaya, brown bear cubs in Russia, lizards in Morocco, badgers in Ireland, reindeer calves in Norway, ptarmigans in England, hawks in Arizona, or swans in Spain.

Almost anything that moves is a potential menu item: mice, gerbils, gophers, squirrels, weasels, ducks, big insects, and large birds, either in the air or on the ground. And they are not averse to eating carrion. As well, they will hunt larger mammals such as foxes, wolves, deer, antelope, sheep, lynx, and bobcats. In maritime locales they will eat frogs, seals, and the occasional fish. (Fortunately, their low-fish diet enabled them to escape the effects of DDT that were at one time so detrimental to the bald eagle.) And they have been known to drop turtles from high in the air as a way to split open their shells.

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Golden eagles, like other birds, have been with us, unchanged, for millions of years. Naturalists and evolutionists once speculated and debated as to how birds actually evolved — where they fit on the evolutionary tree. As it happened, a significant clue to that puzzle was unearthed in Mongolia.

In 1920, during a period of Mongolia's foreign occupation and political upheaval, one of the largest archaeological expeditions of its time was assembled to probe Mongolia's Gobi Desert. The expedition was sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the first of five scientific field trips it initiated inside Mongolia. The effort was the culmination of eight years of planning and lobbying by Roy Chapman Andrews, the thirty-two-year-old man who led the mission. (Andrews is speculated to be the archaeologist on whom the Indiana Jones character was patterned.) Their quest was to find evidence of the origins of mankind somewhere in the wastelands of Mongolia. Almost immediately upon entering the desert, the team realized they had stumbled on perhaps the densest and richest boneyard in the world. But the remains were not human. Instead, they had uncovered a motherlode of dinosaur fossils.

The Andrews expeditions, when not fending off roving bandits, made hundreds of significant finds, but one stood out among the rest. In 1922, team member George Olsen uncovered a mostly intact nest of fossilized dinosaur eggs. At the time, the scientific community was still debating how

dinosaurs reproduced. Some believed that they delivered a live birth, like mammals. The Mongolian discoveries helped to shatter that assumption. With the Gobi Desert discoveries, along with others that followed, evidence slowly but steadily solidified the evolutionary link between the ancient branch of dinosaurs and that of birds.

Even without scientific evidence or paleontologists' discoveries, a cursory view of a golden eagle (and other birds of prey) points back to the Cretaceous period, seventy-five million years ago, and a link with the world of dinosaurs. The connection is in their feet and in their eyes.

Like most birds, the golden eagle has feet with four-toed claws, three forward and a larger one at the back, like a thumb, called a hallux claw. As with carnivorous dinosaurs, each toe of the golden eagle ends with a curved talon, five centimetres long and razor-sharp, arming the avian hunter. The feet are covered with a skin of tough, yellow-coloured scales and scutes, the same keratin skin covering given to reptiles such as the crocodile. It's telling that we use the word *raptor* to describe both large-talon birds of prey like the golden eagle and their distant theropod dinosaur cousins.

Even though the average human outweighs a golden eagle by at least a multiple of ten, our eyes and theirs weigh the same. In fact, a golden eagle's eyes weigh more than its brain. This not only speaks to its remarkable vision but also to its economy of weight. That, along with other body traits, leads to the main attribute that distinguishes birds from dinosaurs and mammals: they can fly.

For dinosaurs to eventually become airborne, they had to go on a weight-loss program that took a few million years. Bones, brain matter, and even teeth are relatively heavy — a problem if you want to defy gravity. To evolve from dinosaurs, birds had to discard or downgrade many things. The golden eagle thrives without a strong sense of taste and smell, and thus needs fewer glands and less capacity in the cerebrum. It has no bladder and a reduced liver. To aid flight, birds developed a drastically thinner hollow-bone structure — but with reinforced interior struts, like roof trusses, their skeletons have incredible tensile strength. Birds, even large carnivores like the golden eagle, have thin-boned skulls. They lack heavy lower jaws and

the corresponding muscles that mammals need to cut, chew, and grind raw meat or vegetation. Instead of teeth, birds of prey have small bumpy protrusions in the mouth that help to hold the flesh prior to ripping, gulping, and swallowing meat pieces whole.

Tail Feathers, 2017, mixed media, 28 x 20 inches

Developing feathers from scales was possibly evolution's best weight-reducing idea. Feathers are unique to birds. They are incredibly light, aerodynamic, friction-resistant, and surprisingly resilient and strong. New feathers are produced yearly, replacing the old ones, one at a time — a process called moulting that is ongoing throughout the eagle's life. Each eagle feather is amazingly individualistic. The stylized light and dark patterns on each tail feather will differ not only from every other but also from the same follicle's replacement feather. Their feathers also have subtle transverse streaks, like growth

rings in a tree. In a similar way, these lines reveal the stress level that the bird has endured over specific times in the year, due mainly to a scarcity of food.

Although feathers are light, soft, and appear fragile, they are able to endure gale-force winds and to withstand terrific G-force pressures when a bird, for example, is dive-bombing its prey. On a few occasions, I've watched an attack during which a golden eagle became violently upended in a tumbling and thrashing fight before it finally gained control of its prey. In the melee, the eagle's wing and tail feathers were pummelled and crumpled backwards and forwards, this way and that, over a rocky terrain. Even so, in the aftermath, when the eagle righted itself, it just shook out its feathers and returned to its previous sublime form.

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* Hawking also describes the use of birds of prey for hunting. Some believe that it should refer to only eagles and hawks, with falconry reserved for hunting with falcons.

CHAPTER TWO

Back to the Future

The extended period of warming had long ended. The tropical climate that once produced a canopy of broad-leaf trees and sprawling swamp and wetlands was now replaced with vast stretches of arid sand and savannah plains that stretched across most of Central Asia. But the cooler temperatures and arid climate supported more than rushes, sedges, and scrubgrass flora. The early Pleistocene brought to the Asian plateau a menagerie of megafauna: giant camels, woolly and steppe mammoths, mastodons, huge cave lions and cave bears, giant polar bears, woolly rhinos, and five-tonne sloths, among others.

By a river on the grassland steppes of what is now central Mongolia, dozens of birds of prey floated high above the carcass. But the golden and steppe eagles, and the huge Mioneophron, Sarcogyp, and Neogyp vultures, would have to wait. Below, a voracious pack of giant hyenas with their bone crushing jaws had opened up the remains of the odd-looking, ape-like horse. The Chalicothere had long upper limbs and gorilla hands and walked on two legs. It had been chased down and killed the day before by a roving group of the 1,500-pound, bear-like dogs. For the golden eagles, patience and cunning were necessary to secure a meal in a crowded field of heavyweight contenders.

I flew into Mongolia via its capital, Ulaanbaatar, which is the only international air access to the country. From what I'd read of its history, it originated as a small monastery-yurt outpost in the fifteenth century. Between then and now, the city has had a nomadic existence, moving to different locations at least two dozen times and often assuming a new name after doing so. The capital is now home to 1.5 million people, which is close to half of Mongolia's total population. This fact initially surprised me, as I'd assumed the country was still dominated by pastoralists living on the land.

Not long ago that was indeed the case, but things have changed. Ulaanbaatar is the recent recipient of a massive movement of people who have been steadily transitioning from rural to urban life. One of the contributing factors is a recent —

and large — economic infusion from the country's natural resources; namely, its estimated $100 billion worth of mineral deposits. Mongolia has partnered with a number of international mining companies and related corporations that are now finding and exporting enormous quantities of coal, copper, gold, oil, and uranium, accounting for 70 per cent of its GDP. It's why the country is sometimes referred to now as Minegolia. As Mongolia's only significant city, Ulaanbaatar has been the country's sole growth centre, helped by the recent surge of businesses and public services.

When I first arrived in Ulaanbaatar, I got a room in the city centre, at a modest place called the Lotus Guesthouse. My plan — prior to flying across country to Ölgii, staying with Beken and other eagle hunters, and attending the annual Eagle Festival — was to visit the capital for a few days, look around, and get acquainted with urban Mongolian life.

Characterless, Soviet-inspired 1950s square-block buildings dominated the city centre. In recent years, more modern-looking buildings have emerged, giving the city the hint of a contemporary profile. On the whole, the place felt friendly and safe.

Ulaanbaatar's core felt like any other busy, modern city, although it seemed to have more banks, more karaoke establishments, and more restaurants than there could possibly be patrons for — and definitely more cars than road space. Under Soviet urban planning, the city was designed for far fewer people, people who would use public transportation. During the day, vehicle traffic was continually gridlocked. Mongolians seemed to have transferred horse-riding etiquette to automobile driving. Any open pavement was an invitation to fill it, as quickly as possible. Turn signals were optional. Lines on the road? What lines? Pedestrians crossing at intersections, with or without traffic lights, risked life and limb.

The other surprise on the road was the sheer number of Toyota Priuses. Mongolia has few roads outside the capital, and only 10 per cent of those are paved; the rest could be mostly described as dirt trails and grassland ruts. Add to this the extreme weather conditions (Ulaanbaatar is the coldest capital in the world), and one might imagine the Mongolian vehicle of choice, if not necessity, would be a heavy-duty, kick-ass, four-

wheel-drive jeep, not a diminutive hybrid. And yet, in 2015, used Priuses made up an astonishing 52 per cent of all the vehicles Mongolia imported. The main reason, apart from it being a pretty good car, is that, as a hybrid, Mongolia exempts it from all state, excise, import, and environmental taxes. This can save thousands of dollars. Hybrid vehicles aside, Ulaanbaatar — also known as the Big Ashtray — still ranks as the most polluted city in the world during the winter months, thanks to the exhaust from little coal-burning stoves that heat the two hundred thousand *gers* in the suburban encampments that surround the city core.

Three blocks from where I was staying, at the very centre of the city, is a huge open plaza, the width and length of an entire city block. It is called Genghis Khan Square. Prior to 2013 it was called Sükhbaatar Square, named for the Mongolian leader of the 1921 revolution that helped liberate the country from Chinese occupation. A bronze statue of Damdin Sükhbaatar mounted on his horse sits in the centre of the square, on the exact spot where his horse urinated during a 1921 rally — supposedly a good omen.

Spanning the length of the north end of the square is the Government Palace, an impressive marble building that houses the Mongolian Parliament. At the very centre of the palace, set into an architectural recess and sitting face-out over the square, is a five-metre-high bronze sculpture of Genghis Khan. It's as if the building was constructed carefully around the Great Khan. It has a powerful presence, reminiscent of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. At the west end of the building sits a slightly smaller bronze of Genghis Khan's son, Ögedei Khan, and, at the east end of the building, Genghis's grandson, Kublai Khan. Each of the statues is set among twelve-metre-high marble pillars, and across the front of the five-storey palace is a façade of blue glass that suggests the ancient Mongol animist worship of the natural elements, chief among those, the Eternal Blue Sky.

Flying above the Government Palace is the flag of Mongolia: a vertical tricolour design with two red columns surrounding a blue centre. On the left red bar is the yellow-coloured soyombo symbol. Its ten geometric elements date back to the country's shamanistic past. Along with the yin-yang symbol, the design

elements represent fire, the sun, the moon, the Earth, and water, plus two downward-pointing triangles alluding to the arrow and the spear.

On each side of the Government Palace's grand stairway, flanking Genghis Khan, are five-metre-high bronzes of two Mongol warriors on horseback. These are Bo'orchu and Muqali, Genghis's trusted generals. Both horsemen and their mounts bristle with body armour and weaponry — waiting, watching, and ready. To my eyes, the two large bronzes were more effective guardians of the Mongolian Parliament than the two actual soldiers who patrolled the palace's upper landing.

Genghis Khan is now regarded as the nation's father figure. Mongolians have selectively ignored some of the more brutal aspects of the Great Khan's reign and instead focused on his positive accomplishments, polishing his legacy and immortalizing his memory to such an extent that he is now practically considered a saint. In the last couple of decades, a number of institutions and products have been branded with his name and likeness. Ulaanbaatar's city square, its international airport, the university, city streets, and hotels and restaurants all honour his memory. Even the green-shamrock watering hole located in Ulaanbaatar is called The Genghis Khan Irish Pub. His image appears on everything from currency notes to bottles of vodka to children's candy bars.

With a few days on my hands I picked up a Mongolian tourist brochure that highlighted the must-see attractions. These included a magnificent Genghis Khan memorial, the most audacious canonizing of Genghis Khan in the entire country. The image on the brochure seemed so unbelievable that I needed to see it for myself, so I hired a taxi to drive me to its location, fifty-five kilometres outside of Ulaanbaatar. There, out on the open plains, in the middle of nowhere, a multimillion-dollar sculpture was erected in 2008. It is an enormous, forty-metre-high Statue of Liberty–like depiction of the Great Khan mounted on his horse, holding his famous golden whip (the statue is supposedly sitting at the spot where he found it). The statue was situated on top of a two-storey museum, its exterior supported by thirty-six columns, each representing one of the Khan emperors who ruled throughout Mongol history. From inside the museum I climbed the stairs

(there is also an elevator) through the Genghis sculpture by way of the interior of the horse's tail to a viewing platform on top of the horse's head. This offered a fabulous view of the surrounding steppes.

The 250-tonne, polished stainless-steel statue can be seen from miles away, glowing with an aura, as if internally lit. Juxtaposed against the barren landscape, its presence and its immense size are, at first glance, like the accomplishments of the Khan himself, hard to comprehend.

There is more than a touch of irony to this grand memorial and to the "Genghis Khan-ing" of the nation. During Genghis Khan's reign he allowed no paintings, drawings, or depictions of himself of any kind. No coins or statues carried his likeness. Apart from a few scant descriptions that have been passed down, what he actually looked like is left to one's imagination. During his life, he had no interest in aggrandizing his reputation with monuments. In the history of empire builders, he must be one of the very few, if not the only one, not to erect any grand monoliths, marble palaces, or huge memorials to his honour. Even his gravesite, following his instructions, is unmarked and unknown.

GENGHIS KHAN

> *If you had not committed great sins, your God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you.*
>
> — Genghis Khan

Before their rise to world dominance, the Mongols were just one of dozens of kin-based tribes living on the steppes: Merkits, Mongols, Tatars, Keraits, Naimans, and Tuvans, among others. In an isolated region with a challenging climate and limited resources, the strongest often dictated rules of interaction between tribes. Stealing another group's horses, women, or property was common; so were shifting alliances, betrayals, and tit-for-tat retaliations. The powerful Jin Dynasty to the east, like a master conductor, helped orchestrate this disunity through treachery, bribery, and collusion. For a century, it had the desired effect of keeping its nomadic neighbours fractured and impotent.

The Mongols of the twelfth century had no lineage or

inherited foundation of wealth or power, or any discernible legacy upon which to build an empire. They neither wrote nor read nor printed books like the neighbouring Chinese; they grew no crops and made no pottery, nor did they weave carpets or cloth, as was commonplace in Africa, Persia, and Europe. Their technology was basic, compared to that of many other cultures of the time. For the most part they stayed isolated and insular, in a marginally defined orbit.

Yet, in short order, they created an empire, the largest the world had ever seen, twice the size of the Roman Empire. How was this possible? Even with the benefit of decades of scholarly research the accomplishment still defies belief. It's a story that holds some of the most remarkable, as well as the most disturbing, aspects of human endeavour in all of history. It was such an overwhelming feat that, eight hundred years later, visions of a fearsome horde spilling and plundering across and beyond the mountain steppes of Central Asia are still indelibly set in human thought.

On the twenty-something-hour flight to Mongolia I'd been reading Malcolm Gladwell's book *David and Goliath*, in which he talks about the commonly made mistake in history of underestimating the underdog. I wondered if this theory would apply to the thirteenth-century Mongols. But then, I wasn't sure if the Mongols were the underdogs or the advantaged. Was Genghis Khan . . . David? Genghis's early years certainly didn't point towards him being Goliath.

Statue of Genghis Khan atop a museum and visitors' centre

. . .

The boy named Temüjin was born in 1162. When this future Khan was nine, members of a rival tribe called the Tatars poisoned his father, the leader of a small family clan. This threw Temüjin's tribe into disarray. Most deserted to other tribes, leaving Temüjin, his older siblings, and his mother as outcasts to fend for themselves.

Behter was Temüjin's older half-brother, born of a different mother. In steppe tradition, in the absence of a father, whether permanently or just for a few days, the older brother assumed patriarchal control of the family and the household property. The death of Temüjin's father meant that Behter would replace his father — including, when he was of age, in the matrimonial bed (provided that the father's wife was a stepmother to the son). According to *The Secret History of the Mongols,* the mother, Hoelun, accepted the arrangement with the young Behter, but Temüjin could not abide having his half-brother dominate him and his mother.

Eagle Dreams, 2017, mixed media, 14 x 21 inches

In the families of golden eagles, an older hatchling will often kill or push a younger fledgling out of the nest, but in the case of young Temüjin and the senior sibling Behter, it was the other way around. *The Secret History of the Mongols* unabashedly states that Temüjin simply eliminated his older brother, murdering him while the two were out hunting one day.

A period of alliances, betrayals, and wars among the tribes followed before — through successive defeats of his enemies, coupled with a growing coalition of his allies — Temüjin, now an adult, was able to unify the steppe clans and tribes. In 1206, he was proclaimed Genghis Khan, the undisputed Mongol leader. (For the Mongols, the term khan denoted a person of high standing such as a lord, supreme ruler, or emperor.)

In the Mongol belief system, the supreme being of everything was Tengri. This god presided over the Eternal Blue Sky and all the other ninety-nine lesser deities. And, according to Temüjin, it was Tengri who told him he would grow to become a great khan and would rule the world. With the deity's assurance that his destiny was preordained, Genghis Khan, the steppe tribes united behind him, began a decades-long carnage in a quest for a world empire. At the time, the Mongol population numbered less than one million people.

A WARRIOR CULTURE

> *. . . to kill men, invade other's lands, acquire other's goods by unjust methods, to fornicate, to do injury to other men, to act against the commands received from God is not a sin among them.*
>
> — Giovanni di Plano Carpini, *The Story of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars*

During my time on the steppes I often found the distance between present and past seemed blurred and hard to distinguish. Unlike most other environments, societies, and cultures that are constantly buffeted and altered, the world of the nomadic eagle hunters appeared to exist inside a suspended time warp where the laws of "change" were mostly absent. Certainly, the lack of modern products was part of it, as was a barren land that was able to support few people or facilitate much in the way of construction. Another contributor may have been the hostility of an unrelenting climate that froze time and constricted change. (I'd had similar thoughts years before in the Arctic, regarding the early, sea-hunting culture of the Inuit.) Whatever the reason, the echoes of the Mongols, their horses, and their armies rumbling across the land seemed to be carried in the wind.

As Genghis's empire expanded, he organized his army into units of ten, one hundred, one thousand, and ten thousand soldiers, each with a leader responsible to the head of the next largest unit. A regiment ten thousand strong, made up of the elite Imperial Guards, was assigned to protect Genghis and the Mongol nobles. Soldiers were not paid a wage; rather, they claimed a portion of what they plundered, which functioned as a natural incentive. After the Great Khan, his family, nobles, and soldiers took their share, the remaining booty was distributed among the Mongol people. With a relatively small population, and given the quantities of loot that were amassed, the Mongol citizenry was, over a short period of time, swimming in stuff.

To assign the leadership role of commander or general, Genghis Khan assessed officers on the basis of merit, and not by the system of heritage or privilege that existed within most armies. It has been estimated that the Mongol Empire had a force of around 150,000 soldiers at its height, some of whom were conscripted from conquered lands. Prisoners and slaves were also used for hauling supplies, moving siege apparatus, and as human shields. The Mongols avoided hand-to-hand combat as much as possible, preferring the long-distance engagement of the bow and arrow and the catapult. Mounted archers accounted for a large proportion of their army, which stressed the importance of mobility and swiftness.

Genghis Khan usually presented his opponents with two options prior to a pending assault: one was to surrender, the other was to be annihilated. Either way, they conquered practically everyone they met — the Jin Dynasty, the Tangut people, the Kara Khitan Khanate, the Khwarazmian Empire — with similar results in Persia, Hungary, Poland, and Bohemia. For the inhabitants of Russia and eastern Europe, the phrase "The Mongols are coming!" inspired enough mass hysteria for them to pick up and evacuate their homes and settlements, leaving most of their possessions behind. Travelling through the Russian capital of Kiev in 1246, after the Mongol incursion, Pope Innocent IV's envoy Friar Giovanni di Plano Carpini, wrote:

> They attacked Rus, where they made great havoc,

> destroying cities and fortresses and slaughtering men; and they laid siege to Kiev, the capital of Rus; after they had besieged the city for a long time, they took it and put the inhabitants to death. When we were journeying through the land we came across countless skulls and bones of dead men lying about on the ground. Kiev had been a very large and thickly populated town, but now it has been reduced almost to nothing, for there are at the present time scarce two hundred houses there and the inhabitants are kept in complete slavery.[1]

To the east, the Mongols accomplished what the Europeans and the Turks had been unable to do in two hundred years of trying; namely, take Baghdad, the largest and the most coveted jewel in the Muslim crown. The Mongols utterly obliterated the five-hundred-year-old creation of Islamic culture, wisdom, and wealth.

According to Abdullah Wassaf, a fourteenth-century Persian historian:

> They swept through the city like hungry falcons attacking a flight of doves, or like raging wolves attacking sheep, with loose reins and shameless faces, murdering and spreading terror . . . beds and cushions made of gold and encrusted with jewels were cut to pieces. Those hiding behind the veils of the great Harem were dragged through the streets and alleys, each of them becoming a plaything as the population died at the hands of the invaders.[2]

Estimates of this one city's death toll range upwards of two hundred thousand people. Palaces, mosques, and government buildings were razed to the ground. Gardens, magnificent tapestries, and grand halls with carved marble and inlaid mosaic floors were all destroyed. The great Baghdad library, the largest in the world with its tens of thousands of priceless hand-scribed books on science, architecture, and medicine, was obliterated. The city's annihilation was so complete that even centuries later Baghdad existed only as a shadow of its former

self.

. . .

The Mongols also had the flexibility of character to learn and adopt techniques of warfare from all manner of sources. They were happy to incorporate any Arab, Chinese, European, or Persian technology that seemed useful or better than theirs. After seizing a town or city, the Mongols would select craftsmen, engineers, and designers as captives. It was these people whom they persuaded or forced to work for them. With the collective knowledge from other cultures, the Mongols built catapults, mangonels, traction trebuchets, and giant siege crossbows that allowed them to successfully storm an enemy's heavily fortified cities and battlements.

In battle, the Mongols used many ingenious manoeuvres to confuse and mislead the enemy. A favourite was to feign retreat, as if in defeat, luring the opposition to give chase. This would lead their foe away from their fortifications and into an ambush. Their commanders also made use of a sophisticated communication system of flags and banners and flaming arrows. On occasion, they diverted rivers to flood cities, dug beneath walled fortifications to undermine them, catapulted highly contagious cadavers into city fortifications, and used false information and trickery to inflate the size of their force to help break the enemy's morale. Intimidation, terror, deception, collusion, brute force, and psychological manipulation were all part of their military handbook. Their victories were often so surgical, swift, and calculated that it seemed as if the Mongol khans were playing chess while their opponents were playing checkers.

. . .

So an isolated, relatively small number of tent-dwelling, horseback-riding nomads were the building blocks of the world's largest empire? How could that be? I tried to wrap my head around it. I mused over a closer-to-home comparison: the Plains Indians of North America.

In the early 1800s they too were a nomadic people, moving over their grassland plains following the herds of wild buffalo

that they depended on. Both they and the Mongols were tribal peoples with the ability to live off animals and animal products on the open plains in their portable tents. Perhaps just as importantly, like the Mongols, the Plains Indians were daring horseback riders and superb archers.

I try to imagine an alternate history wherein the Indian tribes on the North American plains — the Apache, Cheyenne, Lakota Sioux, Navajo, Kiowa, Arapaho, Comanche, Pawnee, and Blackfoot — ceased fighting each other and united under one giant confederacy. Instead of raiding, and stealing horses and women from one another, they coalesced under a great visionary chief. Visions from the Great Spirit revealed to this grand chief a calling: to conquer and rule the white man and seize his territories, all the way to the Eastern Seaboard.

Following this dictate to conquer, the tribes would have been greatly outnumbered, fighting a foe entrenched behind city walls, in unfamiliar territory, and lacking the seeming advantage of the opponent's technology. Nonetheless, they would successfully ride eastward, capturing, massacring, and laying waste to any city or town that refused to surrender. St. Louis and Lexington would scoff at the idea of surrendering to horseback savages and would promptly be slaughtered. Moving east across the Appalachians, rumours of the advance of the warrior force would spread terror throughout eastern colonies. Charleston, followed by Richmond, would surrender unconditionally, and both would be looted but spared. Baltimore would resist and be burned to the ground. The warriors would then encircle and lay siege to New York and Washington, forcing them to capitulate. Both cities would subsequently be looted and their leaders killed.

After the victories in the east, the Great Indian Chief, in his golden eagle headdress, would convene the Grand Council and ask the gods — the sun, moon, wind, and sky — to grant his sons the wisdom and power to succeed him in further campaigns. With the blessing of the gods, one son would take a huge contingent north, while another would take one hundred thousand warriors south into the Spanish colony of Mexico with an eye on its vast riches. The Spanish rulers would resist and consequently meet the same fate as the English and the French to the north. After the Great Chief's death, the

grandsons and great grandsons would divide North America into quadrants, vast territories each ruled by a descendant, in a grand continental Indian alliance.

This scenario is . . . what? Inconceivable? Utter fantasy? Yet what the Mongols accomplished across Eurasia in the thirteenth century was just as unbelievable. In fact, what the Mongols did was even more improbable. At their height, the Mongols conquered and ruled over ten times the number of people than were present in the America colonies in the early 1800s. And they invaded, conquered, and controlled, at their zenith, far more territory than the entire North American continent.

. . .

The plundered riches and the active trade of products that Genghis Khan initiated materially benefited all levels and strata of the Mongol people. Paradoxically, Genghis was wary of personal adornments and comforts. Historians point out that despite all the cities he conquered, he entered only one building during his entire life. “I hate luxury. I exercise moderation,” he reportedly said. “It will be easy to forget your vision and purpose once you have fine clothes, fast horses and beautiful women. [In which case], you will be no better than a slave, and you will surely lose everything.”[3]

Apparently, Genghis’s dedication to moderation didn’t actually apply to beautiful women in the bedroom. He had twenty-three official wives, sixteen regular concubines, and about five hundred others whom he could draw upon. There was a standing order that any especially attractive young women who were captured were to be first offered to Genghis or divvied up among his family members and officers. The estimate is that Genghis Khan fathered between one thousand and two thousand children in his lifetime. In 2003, a Y-chromosome DNA test was conducted on five thousand Asian men. From the results of that test, biochemists have extrapolated that, today, 8 per cent of Asian males are descendants of Genghis Khan. That’s one out of two hundred males worldwide, or sixteen million people.

In the fall of 1227, while engaging the Jin Dynasty in battle,

Genghis Khan, at the age of sixty-five, died unexpectedly from a cause that was much speculated about but, in the end, unknown. His death was kept a secret until after the battle so as not to undermine the ongoing military engagement. After his death, as Genghis Khan had willed, his son Ögedei succeeded him as the new khan.

Fifty years after Genghis's death, the Mongol Empire had conquered and ruled over one hundred million people and was in control of fourteen million square miles. This vast territory contained a plethora of tribes and cultures, with different religions, ethnicities, customs, and languages. Administering lands across such distances, with one voice or one khan, was becoming impossible. Also, succession for monarchical rulers was often fraught with difficulties, and with the Mongols it was no different. Genghis's four sons were each victorious army commanders with supporters at the highest levels of the Mongol court. Each saw himself as the rightful khan. And matters got even more complicated and testier with the generation that followed.

Plots, jealousies, and even battles broke out between some of Genghis's seven grandsons. The more ambitious felt qualified to step into their grandfather's shoes, but with family consensus no longer possible, a few simply pre-emptively declared themselves the new Great Khan. An agreement to divide the realm into four parts, or khanates, temporarily halted the slow disintegration and fracturing of the Mongol Empire. Batu — the son of Genghis Khan's eldest son, Jochi — took control of Russia, a territory called the Golden Horde. Chagatai, Genghis's second son, ruled present-day Uzbekistan, called the Chagatai Khanate. Genghis's grandson Hulegu oversaw the Ilkhanate, which consisted of Persia and Iraq. And lastly, another grandson, Kublai, headed the Yuan Dynasty in China.

The rule of the khans lasted for about 150 years, with diminishing lands, control, and power.

Golden Dragon, 2017, mixed media on paper, 21 x 14 inches

FALCONRY

No living man can, or possibly ever will, understand the instinct of predation that we share with our raptorial servant.
— Aldo Leopold, "A Man's Leisure Time"

Like today's Kazakh eagle hunters, the Mongol khans had a strong cultural connection to the sport of falconry. One of the earliest mentions of Mongol falconry is found in *The Secret History of the Mongols,* a 1227 book commissioned by Genghis Khan's descendants shortly after the Great Khan died. One of the book's early passages tells a story of Temüjin (Genghis),

still a young boy, catching an eagle to give to his father. Further accounts and historical research confirm that the Mongols were expert falconers, commonly using a wide array of raptor species, and specifically golden eagles, to hunt larger game.

Today a small and dedicated network of people in many parts of the world passionately trains and flies raptors for hunting. By all accounts it is a demanding and totally consuming hobby. People over the years have attempted, with varied success, to try almost every species of raptor for hunting. A few have proven fairly compliant, some require more work than others, some are labelled “challenging,” while others are considered impossible to capture, tame, train, or bond with. Often the terrain and the available prey dictate which raptor is most suitable.

The most successful accipiter (a mid-sized, forest-inhabiting hawk with short wings and a long tail) used by falconers is the Harris’s hawk. It is a social bird in the wild, often hunting smaller birds cooperatively in packs. Of the larger hawks, the preferred choice seems to be the red-tailed. It accommodates a close human presence better than most and is relatively easy to train. The red-tailed hawk will hunt small animals as well as geese, ducks, pheasants, and wild turkeys. Of the different varieties of falcons, the peregrine is the most commonly sought among falconers. These are great aerial attackers, knocking unsuspecting birds, unconscious, right out of the sky.

Among current European and North American falconers, the Kazakh steppes are regarded as the Mecca of falconry. The answer to why West Mongolia separates itself from what is practised elsewhere is found in the bird, in its master, and in the land itself.

. . .

Throughout history people have practiced falconry as a sport and as a practical way to obtain food and furs. Evidence suggests that falconry may have been first practised in Mesopotamia (today’s eastern Syria, eastern Turkey, and Iraq). Through foreign invasion, migration, and trade, falconry techniques gradually spread from village to village, region to

region, and continent to continent, across much of the world.

A 4,500-year-old petroglyph found on the Mongolian steppes profiles a hunter on horseback holding a large eagle, indicating that the region's early inhabitants were falconers. Archeological finds in China from 800 to 700 BCE show cave drawings and carvings depicting people using birds of prey. At some later point, falconry was introduced to Japan, where it became one of the disciplines in the rigorous training of a Samurai warrior. Germanic tribes during the fourth century CE and, by around 900 CE the English and Europeans, practised falconry. In Europe, it met with more than passing interest. Falconry quickly grew in popularity to become the most widely practised sporting activity in medieval times.

The falcon is a bird that runs deep in Middle Eastern mythology and continues to be an important symbol in Arab culture — so much so that in 1999 two state-of-the-art falcon hospitals were built in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Combined, the air-conditioned facilities have room for two hundred birds and can care for six thousand falcons annually.

Europe and North America have no cultural tradition in the use of golden eagles for falconry. Even now in Western countries their use is extremely rare. For the most part they are considered too big and too difficult to obtain and too unpredictable and dangerous to train and fly. With their size and aggressive spirit, golden eagles have on rare occasions attacked people on the ground and while paragliding and parachuting. Only the steppe nomads on the Central Asian Plateau have maintained a long-held preference for these magnificent birds.

. . .

Historically, falconry was practised across all social strata. The privileged considered it a serious sport, even an art form. Closely aligned with upper-class refinement, falconry was once regarded as an important benchmark of high society. To a lesser extent, this still holds true with Saudi princes, Scottish nobles, German barons, and the like.

In England, it was once common for nobles, barons, knights, and even the clergy, including nuns, to be avid falconers. The

sport was so competitive that nobles would bid against each other to procure the best master falconers to oversee their stable of hunting raptors. The lower classes, wanting to emulate their rulers, also kept birds of prey that were used for sporting entertainment and as a practical way to obtain food to eat and furs to wear or sell.

In medieval England, social position was dictated from birth and enforced by law — to the extent that what bird you were allowed to own was determined by social standing. Each raptor species was assigned a hierarchical value that corresponded to a social stratum. These rules appeared in *The Boke of St. Albans (The Book of Hawking, Hunting and Blasing of Arms)*, published in 1486. This was essentially an almanac of the rules and regulations, outlining, among other things, who was allowed to own which bird of prey. It went as follows:

Emperor — Golden Eagle
King — Gyrfalcon
Prince — (female) Peregrine
Duke — Rock (female) Falcon
Earl — (male) Falcon
Knight — Saker
Squire — Lanner
Lady — Merlin
Yeoman — Goshawk
Priest — (female) Sparrow Hawk
Holy Water Clerk — (male) Sparrow Hawk
Knaves, Servants, and Children — Kestrel

Kazakh Hunters, 2018, oil on canvas, 22 x 24 inches

Procuring and flying a raptor above one's station would leave a person vulnerable to legal charges.

For the next four hundred years, the practice of falconry continued to infatuate England and Europe. Having a hooded bird of prey sitting on a perch in the drawing room, barn, or stable was as common a sight as a sleeping dog or cat. Portraits commissioned by the aristocracy commonly depicted the individual or the family surrounded by their valued possessions, creating a permanent record of their wealth and social position. Titian, Hans Holbein the Younger, Frans Hals, Wojciech Kossak, Wallerant Vaillant, and many other artists would often include the subject's prize raptor in portraits.

Falconry was so prevalent in the culture that a number of terms related to it made their way into the language. For instance, a raptor caught in the wild, after migrating, would often be thin and tired; such a bird of prey was referred to as a "haggard." And a fleeing raptor will lower its tail feathers, giving rise to the expression "to turn tail" to describe running away from something.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries firearms gradually became the preferred method for obtaining wild game. Urbanization and industrialization, along with the

considerable time and effort needed to train and maintain a bird of prey, also contributed to falconry's diminished popularity. Increasingly, it was reserved as a pastime for the privileged.

As Western societies urbanized and welcomed modernity, an elevated awareness of environmental concerns followed. Some people began to question the ethics of falconry — capturing wild animals to kill other wild animals for sport. Over time an animal rights movement emerged, and growing stronger, became instrumental in influencing governments to the point where in many jurisdictions, restrictions and even prohibition were imposed on hawking.

KUBLAI KHAN AND THE SECRET LIFE OF THE MONGOLS

> *If you put all the Christians in the world, with their Emperors and their Kings, the whole of these Christians, — aye, and throw in the Saracens to boot, — would not have such power, or be able to do so much as this Kublai, who is lord of all the Tartars in the world.*
>
> — Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*

Perhaps the first European to make written reference to Mongolian falconry was the Franciscan monk William de Rubruck. In 1253, he journeyed east into the heart of the Mongol Empire, on behalf of King Louis IX of France, to gauge the possibility of Mongol support for the Crusades against the Muslims and to promote conversion of the Mongols to Christianity. He documented his three-year adventure in his book *The Journal of William de Rubruck — Account of the Mongols*. In it he mentions that the Mongols fed their birds large rats with long tails: "They have hawks and peregrines in great number which they all carry on their right hand. . . . So it is that they procure a large part of their food by the chase."[4]

Given that falconry had been commonly practised across Europe for at least a couple of hundred years prior to Genghis Khan, observing the Mongols using birds of prey in itself would not have been startling or particularly noteworthy to Rubruck or other early European travellers. What did surprise them was the sheer number of raptors used. Forty years after Rubruck's

sojourn, a more detailed account of the Mongols' passion for hunting with birds of prey was outlined in *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

. . .

The incredible story of Marco Polo's encounter with the Mongols starts in 1264, with Marco's father, Niccolò, and his uncle, Maffeo, travelling to China as Venetian merchants hoping to open and exploit a trade route along the Silk Road. The Polo brothers spent a few years in China and gained access to the court of Kublai Khan — Genghis Khan's grandson — founder and first emperor of the Yuan Dynasty.

Kublai was genuinely interested in learning more about the outside world, particularly about its different faiths. He was seeking to determine if there was one religion that really represented the true God. When the Polo brothers arrived in China they found an array of holy men inside his court. From Tibet and Kashmir were Buddhists (whom the Polo brothers called "idolaters"), among others, performing conjuring acts and "sorcery" for Kublai Khan. He regarded the mastery of such demonstrations as a measure of the conjuror's connection to the supreme being.

Having heard the Polo brothers talk about Christianity and its great leader, Pope Clement IV, Kublai wanted to learn more. He wished to see for himself what magic powers the practitioners of this Christian faith possessed and if it was indeed, as the Polo brothers said, the true way to the ultimate God. He asked Niccolò and Maffeo to return to Venice and bring back one hundred Christian holy men, to be selected by this exalted Christian pope. To ensure the two brothers' safe passage through all the Mongol lands, they carried with them the Khan's golden tablet as their passport.

The Polo brothers discovered on their return home that, while they'd been away in China, Pope Clement IV had died. So, when the brothers regrouped for their return to China in 1271, it was with a revised plan. They would travel with only two Dominican monks and a small vial of holy oil from the new pope — a far cry from the hundred holy men that Kublai Khan had requested. Shortly after leaving Venice, even that

representation came to naught as the two monks aborted the mission, assessing a three-year journey across foreign lands as suicidal.

Although the Polos travelled without the requested holy men, they took someone else who, as it turned out, was far more significant. Niccolò Polo brought his seventeen-year-old son Marco along (apparently only because of Marco's insistence). They couldn't have guessed that this decision would end up impacting and expanding the core of human knowledge for centuries to come.

Marco Polo gives us an amazing look inside Kublai Khan's China. He quickly learned the language and customs and also travelled extensively throughout the realm. Oddly, he gives almost no personal accounts of what he did or his exact role inside the Khan's court. Scholars disagree whether or not he became a city administrator, but at the very least he had a front-row seat to the breadth of the strange Mongol (which he called Tartar) culture.

A statue of Kublai Khan in front of the Parliament House in Ulaanbaatar

In 1295, after twenty-four years abroad, Marco Polo journeyed home, a much-enlightened middle-aged man. Back in Venice, he immediately found himself caught up in a war

between the city-states of Venice and Genoa. Polo's Venetian ship was captured during the fighting, and he spent four years in a Genoese prison before he was freed. While there he shared a cell with Rustichello da Pisa, a writer of romance novels. Polo talked of his adventures inside Kublai Khan's China to a fascinated Rustichello, who began the process of hand-copying what Polo dictated. His account, written in French, starts with the Polos' three-and-a-half-year trek across Asia, passing through hundreds of regions, countries, and cultures, all under the control of the Mongol Empire.

The Travels of Marco Polo reads like a guidebook for future European traders. In a matter-of-fact style, Polo notes local customs, foods, and specialty goods, and details the appearance, disposition, and even the different sexual preferences of the inhabitants in each district he visits. But the most fascinating part of the book is Marco's observations and descriptions, gathered over eighteen years, of the Kublai Khan realm. Polo details the court's lavish lifestyle, its opulent marble palaces with magnificent tropical gardens and their silks and jewels. He tells of markets and shops that overflowed with every kind of product, many so exotic as to be nearly unimaginable.

Marco Polo also gives us perhaps the only written eyewitness account of a Mongol open-field battle. It took place in Manchuria in 1287. The conflict was between Kublai Khan's forces and a breakaway Mongol army led by Kublai's uncle, Nayan. In *The Travels of Marco Polo* he describes the scene:

> The Khan was there on the hill, mounted on a great wooden bartizan [a wooden defensive tower] which was borne by four well-trained elephants, and over him was hoisted his standard, so high aloft that it could be seen from all sides. . . . As soon as the order of the battle was arranged, an infinite number of wind instruments of various kinds were sounded, and these were succeeded by singing, according to the custom of the Tartars before they engage in a fight.
>
> . . . By order of the Great Khan, his signal was first given to the right and left wings, and the great drums of Kublai Khan began to sound. Then the fierce and

> bloody conflict began. The air was instantly filled with a cloud of arrows that poured down on every side, and vast numbers of men and horses were seen to fall to the ground. The loud cries and shouts of the men, together with the noise of the horses and the weapons, were such to inspire terror in those that heard them. Once their arrows had been discharged, the warring parties engaged in close combat with their lances and swords, and with maces shod with iron. Such was the slaughter, and more especially of the horses, that it became impossible for either side to advance upon the other.
>
> The fortune of the day remained undecided, victory wavering between the contending armies from morning until noon . . . [5]

Kublai's nephew was defeated and quickly executed in the Mongol tradition: rolled in a carpet and trampled to death, to avoid shedding any royal blood on the earth.

In this world of excess, even the Kublai Khan's hunting expeditions were unbelievable in their scope. The book describes Kublai watching the proceedings while sitting on his throne of beaten gold, covered with lion skins, atop a huge, covered howdah carried across the backs of four elephants. Polo writes that the hunting entourage included thousands of falconers on horseback with five hundred birds of prey, including gyrfalcons, peregrine falcons, sakers, goshawks, and eagles. The sport was so popular, and so deeply embedded in the Mongol culture, that when the Great Khan travelled to a district that had an uncertain availability of prey, he took with him enormous quantities of caged birds and mammal quarry on the backs of camels, to be released on location so as to guarantee that his birds of prey had something to hunt. Polo described the Mongols' large golden eagles taking game so big and dangerous that European falconers scoffed in disbelief at his account. Polo writes, "Kublai Khan has Golden eagles that are trained to attack wolves, and such is their size and strength that none [of the wolves], however large, can escape from their talons."[6] Summing up gender roles in thirteenth-century Mongol society, Polo states: "It is the women who attend to

their trading concerns, who buy and sell, and provide everything necessary for their husbands and their families, the time of the men being entirely devoted to hunting, hawking and matters that relate to military life. ”[7]

Although his book became a sensation, the European public judged it more a Polo fantasy than a truthful account. After all, Polo described impossible things — like a huge legged snake-like beast that would lie in wait under water and then spring forth to capture dogs, cattle, even people in its massive, tooth-filled jaws, swallowing them whole. Clearly this was evidence of his overactive imagination (since these Europeans had never seen a crocodile). And how, they argued, could another culture — one they had never even heard of — enjoy a wealth and extravagance that overshadowed their own?

Kublai Khan died two years after Polo departed from China. His death hastened the Mongol Empire’s decline in eastern Asia. When Möngke, Kublai Khan’s brother, was summarily forced out of China in 1368, it marked the end of the 160-year reign of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty. Across Eurasia the Mongols gradually disappeared or retreated back to their homeland steppes. Although the empire’s disintegration was irreversible, lesser descendants continued to use the title of khan for another 250 years.

After Kublai’s death, it became even more dangerous and difficult for merchants (or anyone else) to travel from Europe to China. Parts of the Silk Road trade route began to close. Consequently, during the century that followed almost no one could confirm what Polo had seen. European skepticism regarding the accuracy of his account of the Mongols grew. Polo endured a good deal of public ridicule, particularly during the latter part of his life. It is said that on Marco Polo’s deathbed, his friends and family asked him to come clean and admit to the aspects of the book that were exaggerated or falsely written. He is reported to have replied, “I haven’t told the half of it.”

CHAPTER THREE

Mongolia at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

They perched side by side at the cliff's edge, overlooking the frozen Tuul River. Their territory was the southern end of Khentii Nuruu's snow-capped range, a place they had nested for fifteen seasons. Normally by December the golden eagle pair would have migrated farther south for the winter, where hunting was better. But this year was different. Food was everywhere — lying on the trails, along the banks of the river, in snow-covered fields, and hanging from trees. This was meat the eagles didn't hunt. It was the flesh of the ones they avoided. Now, as carrion, it was simply readily available food.

Some of the bodies were only partially frozen, with the smell strong enough to draw others, many others, to what at times became a feeding frenzy. Dozens of snarling wolves, wild dogs, foxes, and bears, and hundreds of squawking ravens, vultures, and raptors were the beneficiaries. But there was little need to fight over the carrion, there was so much. Given the unexpected bounty, the two eagles would remain in their northern range until mid-winter.

A wealth of material has been researched and written about the Mongols, the Khans, and their impressive empire. But what became of Mongolia afterwards, even as recently as one hundred years ago, is much more obscure. All I really knew was that the country had gone from a powerfully vast realm to one that was underdeveloped and semi-impoverished. As I set out to better acquaint myself with how this happened, I discovered that the twentieth century was just as intriguing (and nearly as tumultuous) as what occurred during the thirteenth century.

Urga (Ulaanbaatar) early 1900s, Stéphane Passet (1875–1942)

A LIVING GOD IN A CITY OF FELT

When the bone had been blackened he [the shaman] drew it out, blew off the ashes and began to scrutinize the surface very closely and to look through it into the fire. He continued his examination for a long time and then, with fear in his face, placed the bone back in the coals.

"What did you see?" I asked, laughing.

"Be silent!" he whispered. "I made out horrible signs."

— Ferdinand Ossendowski, *Beasts, Men and Gods*

After their influence dissipated, the Mongols gradually drifted back to the Central Asian steppes, resuming their tribal conflicts and clashes with the bordering Manchus in China. Other Mongols simply remained in the lands they conquered and were absorbed into the local populations.

During the 1600s, Mongolia came under the influence and then the overt control of the Manchus and the Chinese Qing Dynasty. Through the stewardship of the Manchus, hundreds of monasteries and temples were built throughout Mongolia, as Tibetan Buddhism was instituted as the sanctioned religion. The Manchus controlled all aspects of Mongolian life, putting severe restrictions on everything from their language to their liberty. This control came to a violent end at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The accounts I could find of life in Mongolia in the early 1900s fascinated me. At that time, only 14 per cent of

Mongolia's population lived in its few centres, and most of those were Chinese, Russian, or Tibetan Buddhist lamas. The vast majority of Mongolians lived on the steppes, as nomadic pastoralists.

Urga (an earlier name for Ulaanbaatar) in the early 1900s looked nothing like it does now. It was small in size, without roadways, rail lines, airplanes, or ships connecting it to the outside world. Dotting the skyline were three- and four-storey monasteries, temples, stupas, and palaces, most of which were inside a restricted district called the Holy City. The monastic structures contrasted with the rest of Urga's low stone-walled hovels and the sprawl of felt-lined *gers* that gave it its moniker — "City of Felt." The city's description seemed to fit the Middle Ages more than the twentieth century.

Urga was on the ancient, and often tenuous, East-West trade route. Rare eastern medicines, like ground rhinoceros tusk, lizards, snake skins, and monkey gallbladders, were obtainable in Urga if you had the means. Much of what was available came across the Gobi Desert, by way of camel caravans.

Almost a third of the city's fifty thousand people were Tibetan Buddhist lamas, as at least one son from every family was expected to enter monastic life. Although isolated and landlocked, the city was a sacred place and a preeminent spiritual centre for Buddhist oracles, Eastern Asian mystics, and Tibetan pilgrims. Urga was home to the third most powerful Tibetan Buddhist lama in Central Asia. Only the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama, in Lhasa, had a higher standing than Bogd Khan, the Living God, Mongolia's undisputed spiritual leader.

The belief system practised in Mongolia encompassed aspects of both Bon and Lamaism, with their shamanistic and animistic traditions and practices. It emphasized the importance of animal sacrifice and the belief in supernatural spirits, both good and evil. The dark side of the Bon pantheon was powerful and ruthless, able to unleash, when aroused, a destructive vengeance. The populace sought the advice and directives of an array of go-betweens, oracles, shamans, high lamas, and astrologers, who advised the lay people as to what was required to appease an offended spirit.

The conduct of Tibetan Buddhist lamas in Mongolia differed somewhat from other Tibetan Buddhists in the Himalaya and

from the norms of today's devotees. The Mongolian spiritual leaders, it seems, were not averse to drinking, womanizing, taking up arms, and inflicting injury when provoked. A house visit to a family from an important lama, to collect a donation for the monastery, might involve an evening meal and an overnight stay. The sleeping arrangements expected by a higher-echelon lama often included the husband's wife, sister, daughter, or son.

. . .

Under the rule of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, policies were slowly implemented to advance the complete amalgamation of Mongolia into a sovereign China. Mongolia, of course, resisted, but it faced an occupier many times more powerful. In 1911, Mongolia requested assistance from Russia, its northern neighbour. At this exact juncture, however, the Qing Dynasty began to fail at home, giving Mongolia an opening to assert its outright independence.

This was a time when, all across Asia, old empires, dynasties, and monarchies were being challenged, pressured by their citizenry for a greater voice. Over its northern border, a revolution was underway in Russia, pitting the historic rule of the tsarist autocracy against an uprising by the Bolsheviks. The Chinese regime saw the turmoil in Russia as a threat and sent reinforcements into Mongolia to guard against a revolutionary spillover. Japan, meanwhile, was flexing its imperialist muscle in Manchuria, which angered the Russians and led to the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. Japan's presence in Manchuria irritated China as well, while China's control over Inner Mongolia angered Japan. (Mongolia was then called Outer Mongolia, and the territory to the east was called Inner Mongolia because of its proximity to China's capital, then known as Peking.) And to the east of this Asian tinderbox, political tensions in Europe were leading towards World War I.

. . .

An unlikely eyewitness and an unusual historian of Mongolia's and Urga's culture (and instability) in the early 1900s was Beatrix Bulstrode. Bulstrode was a middle-aged British tourist

who wrote about her experiences in a book with the understated title *A Tour in Mongolia*. Quite by accident, I stumbled across her somewhat obscure travel memoir online. As I read her writings I came, in many ways, to envy her entry into a crazy, colourful, and unhomogenized world.

Photographs show a confident lady astride a two-humped camel or perched on a Mongolian horse, with a wool cap, riding breeches, and a heavy ankle-length coat over a buttoned-up white blouse. But her conservative garb belied her intrepid spirit and her appetite for adventure. At that time, she was entering a territory that very few Western tourists, let alone Western women, had seen.

Bulstrode arrived in Urga from across the Gobi Desert, by camel. She would have experienced its rutted roads clogged with hundreds of horses, camels, and dozens of ox carts and *tarantasses*, the elongated Mongolian carriages pulled by donkeys or horses. The trampling of animals and pedestrians and the wooden wheels of assorted carts pounded and potholed the circuitous dirt lanes and pathways to the city's centre. Most of the time, wind-whipped dust uniformly dulled every surface. During the spring thaw and in times of heavy rains, the banks of the Tuul River would regularly overflow, turning the paths and dirt roads into a serpentine quagmire of muck.

Beatrix Bulstrode in Mongolia, from Beatrix Bulstrode, *A Tour in Mongolia* (Methuen: London, 1920)

The shops and storefronts displayed a variety of both the predictable and the strange: bins and barrels of apricots, wool, hides and skins, milk, butter, pashmina, apples, and butchered and skinned sheep and goats. Some vendors had songbirds for sale, as well as pigeons in wooden cages and falcons, sakers, and golden eagles hooded and tethered to their perches. Chinese shopkeepers transacted business in any number of currencies: tea bricks, units of livestock, American dollars, British pounds, Chinese yuan, Mexican pesos, turquoise stones, or silver ingots. The air would be thick with dust and the smell of incense, tobacco, opium, urine, and burning dung. There would be the normal marketplace sounds of people going about their business, with the added cacophony of snarling and barking dogs fighting over garbage, the bellowing of camels, snorting horses, the deep-throated chanting of lamas, cymbals

clanking, and little bells ringing with each rotation of a prayer wheel. Men with shaven heads, in wine, red, saffron, or faded cinnamon robes, walked the dirt lanes; others, demonstrating the depth of their obedience and devotion, prostrated themselves and crawled over the same trampled ground. Here and there high lamas wandered in their Bundt-pan hats, shaded under elaborate umbrellas.

Bulstrode photographed numerous Mongolian princesses with hair formed into the shape of an enormous ram's horn, wrapped in gold and studded with jade, coral, and pearls. While walking the winding streets, she would keep her eyes cast downward, dodging animal excrement, overflowing latrines, and assorted garbage. Now and then nobles and the privileged might place a coin in the outstretched hands of the beggars who sat on the corners. Shamans were a common sight — dirty and strange, their eyes and faces draped in ripped fabric adorned with beads and amulets and their long cloaks glittering with tiny mirrors and sacred items to ward off demons. Their shabby appearance stood in stark contrast to the power and status they actually held in Mongolian society.

Mongolian royalty before 1908, anonymous

In the centre of Urga's town square, a number of men, and perhaps some women, would be sitting in the dust, held in *cangues*. These were very heavy wooden collar-boards fitted around a person's neck and padlocked, the prescribed punishment of the day for minor misdemeanours such as public drunkenness. Displaying the miscreants in public was meant as a deterrent to others, to correct and prevent poor behaviour. The offender's name, address, and misdemeanour were written on a piece of paper that was nailed to the front of the *cangue* beside the captive's head. These offenders were entirely dependent on others for food and water. They would need to be hand-fed, as the board's size and shape made it impossible for the punished to feed themselves.

In places, Bulstrode's writing reflected the British Empire's

attitude towards “others,” measuring people and nationalities by their physical traits, skin colour, appearance, dress, hygiene, and manners. She regularly derided the Mongolians for their lack of cleanliness, though later she discovered that their aversion to bathing came from a number of deeply held Tibetan Buddhist taboos concerning water. Mongolians thought lavish use of water would lead to reincarnation as a fish. And water itself was considered a deity — they regarded washing in it and dirtying it as an affront to that particular god.

Bulstrode witnessed other customs that she was even less prepared for. Mongolia, she discovered, was rife with afflictions. The bubonic plague as well as cholera, smallpox, leprosy, and influenza were evident throughout Mongolia, but they were particularly severe among the citizenry of Urga. Of course, the spread of diseases was not unrelated to the people’s aversion to washing.

Over the doors of the city’s hovels, houses, and *gers* were circular, square, or triangular banners warning the public of the specific sickness that dwelt within. Because the pandemics were so easily spread in the town’s unhygienic conditions, the severely ill were often abandoned to die. Once the person died, they would be wrapped in a blanket and put with other bodies on an open-sided buckboard and driven on a rough trail into the country. Wherever the body slid off the cart was where it was left for the wolves, dogs, and birds of prey. Pandemic or not, the bodies of almost all commoners were disposed of in a similar manner. This Tibetan Buddhist custom of leaving a person’s body (excluding high-ranking lamas) for the birds of prey, wolves, or dogs followed their belief that after death the body was simply an unclean, empty shell. Death freed a person’s soul for birth into another life. This was precisely how the Tibetan Buddhist nomad tribes I lived with viewed the dead, in the Himalayan mountains of Ladakh in the early years of the twenty-first century.

A number of other circumstances made travelling in Mongolia overwhelmingly risky, and doubly so for a woman. By the standards of the day, it was one of the most isolated and lawless places on Earth. Bandits, kidnappers, warring tribal factions, groups of armed Russian, Mongolian, and Chinese soldiers, disgruntled deserters, and various mercenaries

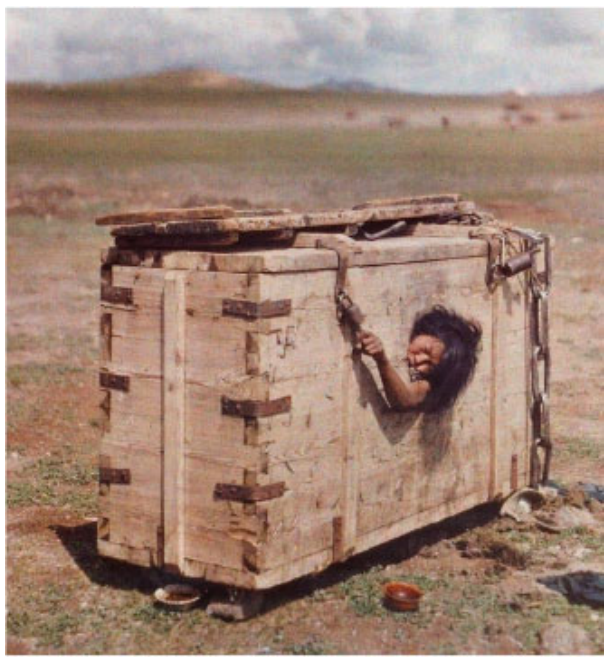
prowled the countryside. At times, Bulstrode travelled by herself with the help of local guides; at other times she travelled with a companion. But she always carried a small arsenal of weapons. Stashed in her various suitcases and travel bags were three revolvers and a hundred rounds of ammo. She writes of sleeping with a loaded gun under her pillow at night.

Illustrated with black-and-white photographs, her book recounts several eyebrow-raising episodes, including the time she stayed with a Mongolian family whose sheep were attacked by wolves during the night. In the morning, packing her guns, Bulstrode set off with the men of the family to hunt for the wolf's den. It was spring, and the shepherds figured the wolves would be raising a new brood of future troublemakers. They found the entrance to the wolves' underground den, but the mother wolf saw them and ran off. They decided to smoke out the little ones but succeeded only in starting a grass fire that quickly raged out of control. Beatrix describes hares and marmots in a panic, trying to flee the steppe fire as birds of prey gathered overhead to pick them off. And even as the fire was spreading in all directions, Bulstrode describes the beauty of the flames leaping and blazing deep into the night. According to her, before it petered out, the fire laid waste to a thousand acres of grassland, presumably what her nomad host's sheep and goats relied on for food.

Unfazed by this setback, the Mongolian men and Bulstrode returned to the den a few days later with shovels and picks, and spent most of the day uncovering six metres of underground wolf tunnels. They finally dug up the wolf's lair, which contained six young cubs. The herders were delighted and quickly killed five of these much-despised future predators. The men cut out the wolf cubs' livers, believing this to be a highly potent medicinal cure-all. Beatrix's maternal instincts (or something) kicked in, and she decided to save one of the wolf cubs, planning to take it back home with her to England. It died in her care two days later.

Reading Beatrix Bulstrode's descriptions of twentieth-century Mongolian life, liberty, and rules of law was shocking. Not much had changed from the days of Genghis Khan. This was conveyed most convincingly in her account of the Urga prison. Instead of normal prison cells, the Mongolian authorities used

heavy wooden padlocked boxes, stacked two high, to incarcerate their prisoners. The trunk-like boxes measured one metre high by just over a metre long by less than a metre wide, with a round fifteen-centimetre hole in the side so small a head could barely poke through. The cells were designed to prevent the inmates from lying down or sitting up. As well, the prisoners were shackled inside their boxes. The Manchus had introduced this device to Mongolia, but numerous cultures going back to the Middle Ages employed immurement, from the Latin “to wall-in.”



Prison Box, Mongolia, c. 1913, Stéphane Passet (1875–1942)

The prisoners, if they lived long enough, would have to endure winter temperatures of -40˚C, as the area they were kept in was unheated. The warden told Bulstrode that the inmates were fed twice a day but under no circumstances were they ever allowed out of the box, unless they were to be executed or released. This meant that the prisoners had to relieve themselves inside their boxes. The boxes were “washed out” every two weeks, with the prisoners still inside. Bulstrode

wrote that she could not convey the stench.

The Urga prison authorities considered this treatment, more often than not, a death sentence. They also saw it as a method of effective, low-cost incarceration. This form of imprisonment remained in use in Urga until the late 1920s. In her book, Bulstrode estimated that the Urga prison held 150 prisoners coffined in this manner. Shaken by her tour of the prison, she wrote, "Nothing I can ever see in the future will wipe out the memory of that terrible prison."[8] As for what the Mongolians considered to be torture, that was something else again.

The Mongolians had at least twenty-five torture procedures that were outlined in a booklet with helpful instructions and illustrations. Torture was commonly used and often conducted publicly, but not as a method to extract information or even as punishment. Mainly it was meant as a deterrent to others (in case the threat of the box wasn't sufficient). The trick in applying effective torture to an individual was to devise something that would inflict as much pain as possible, for as long as possible, without causing the person to lose consciousness or die.

For high-ranking soldiers and commanders during Mongolia's civil war (soon to erupt), death was not feared as much as being captured and tortured. Soldiers, officers, and important officials usually carried a vial of poison on their person. If captured, they would swallow the poison, thus escaping a prolonged, torturous death. If the captors suspected poison had just been ingested, they would sometimes force the new captive to swallow feces to make the captive throw up, thus foiling a quick death.

THE "MAD BARON," FERDYNAND OSSENDOWSKI, AND BOGD KHAN

> *. . . every Mongol knows that his coffin will be the stomach of dogs, wolves or birds.*
>
> — Roy Chapman Andrews, *Across Mongolian Plains*

The more I delved into relatively recent Mongolian history, the more my fascination and bewilderment increased. I found it hard to reconcile the contrast between the peaceful family life I observed with the eagle hunters and the utter brutality of early

twentieth-century Mongolia. I had to continually remind myself that I was reading accounts not of a thousand years ago but of only a few generations back. And things were about to get worse. Shortly after Beatrix Bulstrode returned to England, various surrogate armies and rebels from China, the USSR, and Japan helped propel Mongolia into a full-fledged, seething civil war.

In 1920, at the height of Mongolia's upheaval, arrived one of the most bizarre military leaders of the twentieth century. The man was called, among other things, "the Last Khan of Mongolia," "the Mad Baron," and "the Bloody White Baron."

Freiherr Roman Nikolai Maximilian von Ungern-Sternberg was born in Graz, Austria, in 1885. Freiherr is a title equivalent to baron, and he was indeed born into nobility. When Ungern was a boy, his family moved to Estonia, then part of tsarist Russia, where he attended military school and graduated as a Russian officer. He had a deep adoration for aristocracy, emperors, and the God-given right of sovereigns to govern with absolute power. He was a fierce hater of republicanism, communism, liberalism, Bolsheviks, and, above all, Jews. Even as ruling monarchies were crumbling across Europe, Ungern clung to the notion that kings and emperors were the only hope to prevent "the great unwashed" from rising up and seizing power.

In a prelude to the Russian Revolution, a series of peasant revolts in 1904 and 1905 occurred throughout Russia and beyond. Before the uprising was quelled, a number of nobles were lynched and several estates were burned to the ground, including the estate in Estonia where Ungern was raised. This episode helped further forge Ungern's unbending disdain for the illiterate masses and hardened his belief that only a tight rein and a sharp whip could keep the working rabble in their place.

As a young officer, Baron Ungern fought with the Zabaikal Cossacks in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, and later, in World War I, against the Germans and Turks. He was wounded five times and duly decorated for his valour. His superiors, however, saw his battlefield tactics as too often veering from heroic to excessive to totally unhinged. One commander described him as "invaluable in wartime and impossible in

times of peace."[9] But, alas, even in wartime he was difficult to manage, with an enthusiasm for butchery and an indifference to taking orders. He was reprimanded, punished, and reassigned on more than a few occasions.

Although aspects of sadism weren't unusual among Russian officers — or, for that matter, among most army commanders of the day — Ungern took cruelty to another level. Historians have compared him to Vlad the Impaler, Genghis Khan, and Colonel Kurtz from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* — with just a dash of the Dalai Lama thrown in. He was once dubbed "A Psychopathic Buddhist Warrior-King." Undoubtedly his ferocity was embellished, and given that he was at different times fighting the Russians and the Chinese, both had ample motivation to play up his barbarity. Nonetheless, scholars unanimously agree that the conduct of both Ungern and his soldiers was savage.

Ungern had a deep appreciation for Tibetan Buddhist teachings, and at the same time he proudly claimed to be a descendant of Attila the Hun. Definitely the latter more than the former influenced him. As an officer, bloody confrontations did not faze him, and he was said to ride into battle carrying a deck of tarot cards and ten pounds of holy symbols around his neck, believing such items gave him divine protection. He idolized Genghis Khan and preferred a common *ger* to any mansion's bedchamber. From all accounts, he lived an ascetic life and was seemingly incorruptible and insusceptible to bribery.

Pre-revolution Bolshevik poster denouncing the White Russian elite, Viktor Deni (1893-1946)

With the Russian Revolution underway, Ungern eagerly joined the White Russian (tsarist) forces, which were battling the Bolsheviks (the Reds) for control of Russia. After the Bolsheviks seized control of government, purges of White Russians and tsarist sympathizers commenced throughout Russia. Now a hunted man, Ungern and his cadre of supporters escaped first to Siberia, then into Mongolia. Although not giving up on his plan to return the tsar to the Russian throne, he determined to first free Mongolia from Chinese occupation and reinstate the Tibetan Buddhist holy man Bogd Khan as its supreme ruler. Ungern was already enamoured with Mongolia,

having learned its language and being an admirer of its ancient customs and the mysticism found in Tibetan Buddhist antiquity.

In February 1921, with some tepid support from Japan, Ungern led a 1,500-man contingent of assorted Cossacks, Tartars, Mongolians, Buriats, Tibetan Buddhists, White Russians, and other mercenaries towards Urga. His men were poorly equipped and badly outnumbered by the Chinese occupiers. However, the Chinese fighters — though inside fortified city walls and heavily armed — were poorly trained, essentially a peasant army, sent as conscripts to guard a remote and backward outpost. Ungern's men were tough, battle-hardened, and motivated.

Stories of the legendary Mad Baron fearlessly charging into battle on his white steed, with little regard for self, had already circulated throughout most of Mongolia and definitely among the inhabitants of Urga. With their shamanistic beliefs, many inhabitants had no trouble believing Ungern was the reincarnation of Genghis Khan.

After a few days of concerted fighting, Ungern's forces took control of the city. Ransacking, plundering, burning, and butchery commenced in earnest. Anybody remotely suspected of being a Jew, Bolshevik, Red Russian, or of Chinese descent was slaughtered. Two thousand Chinese were killed inside the city walls. Thousands fled into the countryside to escape the carnage as other Chinese soldiers arrived in a futile attempt to reinforce the city's garrison. They were ambushed and slaughtered by Tibetans and Cossacks about thirty kilometres from Urga. Many were tortured or strung up by the neck as a display and warning to others or simply as a consequence of Ungern's soldiers running amok.

No one was safe as the orgy of massacring continued for days. With Urga now in the hands of Ungern, Bogd Khan — the previously ousted monarch of Mongolia — was freed from house arrest and reinstated.

. . .

During this critical juncture in Mongolia's history, one of the very few eyewitnesses able to gain the trust of Ungern — and

live long enough to write about it — was a Polish professor, author, chemist, mystic, and adventurer named Ferdynand (or Ferdinand) Ossendowski. His book, *Beasts, Men and Gods*, chronicles his bizarre and hair-raising travels through Siberia and Mongolia in 1920-21. It's non-fiction yet, like Marco Polo's accounts, it contains passages that push the boundaries of credibility.

Ossendowski's political sympathies lay with the ruling tsarists, and he was ardent enough to become active during the anti-Bolshevik movement. When the Russian Revolution culminated with the Communists seizing power, Ossendowski, like Ungern, escaped to Siberia. He spent the winter dodging Bolshevik death squads and marauding grizzly bears with nothing but an axe, a rifle, and some bullets.

Still fearing for his life, Ossendowski made his way south, more than three thousand kilometres into Mongolia — at the precise moment Ungern and his men were mopping up after capturing and plundering Urga. Entering the Mongolian capital, any thoughts of finding a safe haven quickly vanished. Coming towards the city of Urga, Ossendowski wrote:

> The Chinese were completely defeated and four thousand prisoners taken. However, these surrendered Chinese tried to escape during the night. Baron Ungern sent the Transbaikal Cossacks and Tibetans in pursuit of them and it was their work which we saw on this field of death. There were still about fifteen hundred unburied and as many more interred, according to the statements of our Cossacks, who had participated in this battle. The killed showed terrible sword wounds; everywhere equipment and other debris were scattered about. The Mongols with their herds moved away from the neighbourhood and their place was taken by the wolves . . . [10]

Ossendowski had already heard stories of the Mad Baron and his propensity to be joyful when in battle and morose when not. There were tales of his apparent invincibility, remaining unharmed though his coat, saddle, and side bags were riddled with bullet holes.

Shortly after arriving in Urga, Ossendowski was informed that Baron Ungern wished to meet him, and he was summoned to his *ger*. Wary of his reputation, Ossendowski prepared for the meeting by securing a small handgun and a vial of potassium cyanide. Entering Ungern's tent, Ossendowski sidestepped a large puddle of fresh blood as he was introduced to the baron and his officers and commanders, including his medical officer and chief poisoner, Dr. Klingenberg. Klingenberg "suggested to Ungern that those men who were so sick as to be worthless for any future fighting be poisoned," historian James Palmer writes. "Dozens were murdered by him as a result."[11]

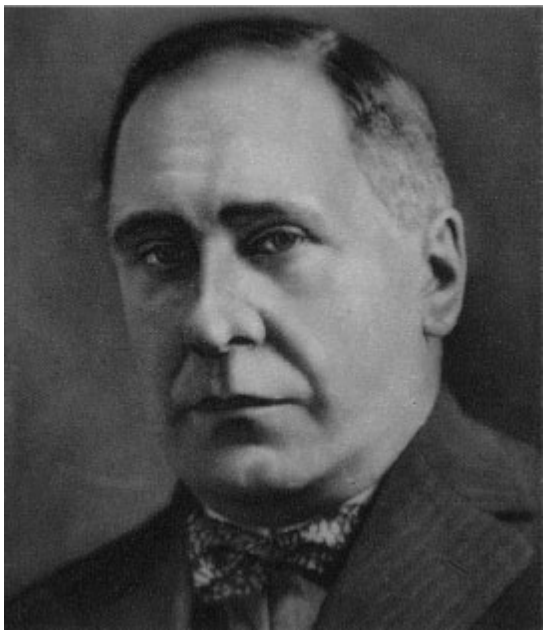
After the trauma of meeting the infamous baron and his cadre of officers, Ossendowski returned to his tent and wrote: "How much easier to fight the Bolsheviks on the swamps of Seybi and to cross the snowy peaks of Ulan Taiga, where the bad demons kill all travellers. There everything was simple and comprehensible, but here it is all a mad nightmare, a dark foreboding storm."[12]

Similar to Marco Polo's relationship with the mercurial Kublai Khan, Ossendowski was able to placate Baron Ungern, and later Bogd Khan, securing a surprising measure of trust with each. Ossendowski's goal was to get back to Poland, but with so much "blood in the water," venturing out of Urga on his own carried risks too great, even for Ossendowski. He asked for the baron's help to get him to an eastern ocean port, where he hoped to get a ship home. The baron agreed to help but said he would need to wait for a few weeks in Urga.

What followed were two weeks of Ossendowski witnessing the behaviour of a paranoid Mongolian ruler who listened to the advice of shamans as much as his own advance scouts and generals. As a defence against his enemies' bullets, swords, and poisons, Ungern put the same faith in prayers, sacred artifacts, and amulets as he did in his guards and their guns. One of the predictions the baron received foretold that he had 130 days to live, a prediction that proved accurate.

Although Bogd Khan had been reinstated as the ruler of Mongolia, it was now mostly a figurehead position, with the real power resting with Ungern. The baron and Bogd Khan, along with their handlers, had to be constantly on guard against an assassin's bullet, mutiny, and poison. Of Bogd Khan,

Ossendowski wrote, “the slightest conspiracy against him and the offender is usually kindly invited to Urga (he had four palace residences), from where he does not return alive.”[13]



Ferdynand Ossendowski (Lublin Voivodeship Library collection in Lublin, Poland)

Depending on whose account you read, Bogd Khan was either a visionary leader — “the Living Buddha” — and a patriotic stalwart of Mongolian independence, or a drunken, cunning, vengeful, promiscuous, bisexual, predatory cross-dresser. Either way, the Mongolian people revered him. Ossendowski was granted an audience with His Holiness, Bogd Khan, on three different occasions. By this time, the fifty-one-year old Bogd Khan had gone blind from syphilis. When his failing eyesight was first discovered, he ordered the manufacture of ten thousand small Buddha figurines plus one enormous statue of Buddha as a remedy. At great expense the statues, made in Poland, were transported across Asia to Urga. But this act of devotion couldn’t prevent his eyesight from worsening. Of Bogd Khan, Ossendowski writes:

> He amuses himself with artillery. . . . On holidays these cannon were fired to great amusement of the blind man [Bogd Khan]. Motorcars, gramophones, telephones, crystals, porcelains, pictures, perfumes, musical instruments, rare animals and birds; elephants, Himalayan bears, monkeys, Indian snakes and parrots — all these were in the palace of "the god" [Bogd Khan] but all were soon cast aside and forgotten.[14]

While in Ulaanbaatar I visited one of Bogd Khan's residences, one of very few Tibetan Buddhist buildings that the Soviets didn't destroy during their seventy-year domination of Mongolia. It is called the Winter Palace and is now a museum. The grounds have an open courtyard containing a dozen interconnecting prayer rooms and temples. On the east side of the estate sits a large, two-storey building chock full of the menagerie of rare things Bogd Khan had collected, including hundreds of every imaginable type of mammal, reptile, and bird, all stuffed and posed in glass cases. One of the more audacious displays in the museum is his personal *ger*. One hundred fifty leopard skins covered the *ger*'s exterior. When Bogd Khan's zoo was fully functioning, he regularly received gifts of live animals from around the world. As his health worsened he lost interest in his zoo, and as the animals died, often from neglect, they were preserved and stuffed.

A staff of hundreds of lamas served and catered to the Living Buddha, ranked by class according to their specific duties. One of the rankings consisted of a group of monks cloistered in one corner of the monastery. Ossendowski described them as Bogd Khan's "doctors of political medicine" — more precisely, they were a group of poisoning assassins. In that regard, not much had changed over the previous seven hundred years. As in the courts of the khans, the fear of being poisoned endured.

Bulstrode's and, to a greater degree, Ossendowski's accounts of Mongolian life read like a theatre of the mad, a cast of semi-deranged actors playing out a dark, barbaric storyline. Ossendowski described Urga as a city in the grip of paranoid men, clinging to the edges of sanity, and operated inside a dizzying vortex of mysticism, madness, and death.

It is amazing that only a hundred years has passed since that play ran its course. Yet even though the characters and the storyline have changed, the stage and set remain — a lonely and foreboding land, almost exactly as it was then. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of Mongolia's modern-day shamans profess to feel the faint strands of that dim past lingering in the land's memory, like time out of mind.

With the baron's help, Ossendowski reached a Pacific port and made sail for the United States, where he published *Beasts, Men and Gods*, a book that became an instant bestseller. After returning to Poland he continued to spend his life travelling, lecturing, and writing over seventy books. In 1945, just after Ossendowski's death, the Soviet Union annexed Poland and burned any of his books that contained an anti-Communist slant, including *Beasts, Men and Gods*. The Soviets continued to ban his books until 1989. Today he is regarded as one of Poland's two most important writers, and some credit Ossendowski with originating the travel-writing genre.

. . .

Like many people fortunate to have good parents and grow up when I did, my path in life was relatively smooth and safe. For others less fortunate, however, the road can be so rugged and uncharted that simply travelling on it presents a sizeable risk. If the road is not of our choosing, we have limited options: turn back, stay put, or, with blind faith, travel on, hoping that what you find up ahead will be better than where you are. Sometimes all you can do is shrug your shoulders and accept what fate has in store for you, understanding that the largest influences on your life — where and when you were born, and who you were born to — are always out of your control.

My grandparents were young adults living in Ukraine during this time of Mongolian mayhem. Ukraine was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the same conglomerate of states that Ungern and Ossendowski were born into. My grandfather, Panko Smutylo, was born five years before Ossendowski and five years after Baron Ungern. Unlike those two protagonists, my grandfather started his early, hand-to-mouth life with neither the advantages of a scholar's education nor the

birthright benefits of nobility. In fact, members of the privileged class, like Ungern and Ossendowski, would have been my grandfather's nemeses.

And yet they shared a few traits. From what I know of my grandfather and what I have read about Ungern and Ossendowski, they all had a strong aversion to authority and an uncompromising, stubborn disposition that nevertheless didn't prevent them from knowing when it was time to run.

I couldn't help but wonder if life's roll of the dice had been different — had Ossendowski not been accepted to the university in Saint Petersburg, had those revolting peasants not chosen Ungern's estate to set ablaze, and had the Canadian government not been recruiting immigrants in eastern Ukraine in 1906 — how would each of their roads, and that of thousands of others, including my own, been altered?

One passage in Ossendowski's writing made a personal connection with me and my Ukrainian roots. It was shortly after he entered Uriankhai, a forested region that straddled Russia and Mongolia. A Cheka death squad stopped Ossendowski and his companions, and lacking proper papers, he had to somehow convince the Cheka officer that they were devout Bolshevik supporters, not White Russian sympathizers. As the questioning continued, the Cheka officer noticed Ossendowski's black trousers and asked if he could buy them. He told Ossendowski that trousers were extremely hard to find in Russia and in many places were simply not available at all. The Cheka officer then opened his ankle-length coat and revealed his badly worn out trousers, which had holes so big that, as Ossendowski wrote, "they were more net than trousers, a net through which a small shark could have slipped."[15]

As one could guess, Ossendowski wasn't keen on parting with his pants, but the officer was persistent and kept upping his offer. Finally, Ossendowski wrote, "The militia-officer got my trousers and I received a rifle with 100 cartridges and two automatic pistols with 40 cartridges each. Moreover, I persuaded the happy possessor of my trousers to give us a permit to carry the weapons. Then the law and the force were both on our side. "[16]

Ossendowski's trouser story gave me pause and took me back to my very early childhood.

When the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl hit North America in the 1930s, the tough, survive-if-you-can farm life on the Canadian Prairies got even tougher. My parents, both born and raised in Saskatchewan, decided, in a daring move, to forgo taking over my grandparents' (Panko's) family farm. Instead, my parents left the west, hoping better opportunities existed elsewhere.

Outside of Toronto my parents bought one acre of land, built a house, and raised my brother and me. Traumatized by the experience of the Depression, my mom and dad combined the security of an hourly wage with the impetus to grow every fruit and vegetable that the southern Ontario climate would allow. Our one-acre lot wasn't a farm, but my brother and I felt as though we worked on one. There were always chores to do: planting, weeding, picking, preserving, and selling produce.

Early Saturday mornings my father would open my bedroom door and awaken me with a well-used Ukrainian proverb, harkening back to the days when peasant farmers had plenty of children but no money. As an incentive to the children to get out of bed and get started on their chores, parents would say, "*Khto pershyy stou. Toi shtany brou.*" It meant, "There's not enough pants for all of you. The last one up will have to go without."

Before reading Ossendowski's trousers episode, I figured the saying originated from the Ukrainian sense of humour, from a proverb, like "the early bird gets the worm." I never suspected its meaning to be quite so literal!

. . .

Ungern's time in Mongolia and his dream of returning Russia to monarchical rule were both about to end. Within six months of taking Urga, the Soviet Red Army had mobilized along the border and proceeded to enter Mongolia with the aim of eliminating Ungern, the last White Russian leader still on the loose. The Red Army quickly retook Urga and, with the betrayal of some of Ungern's own men, captured the fleeing baron. Ungern never had any intention of being captured alive, but his plan of suicide was foiled when he lost his vial of potassium cyanide during his attempt to flee from the Soviets.

The Communists took Ungern by train to Siberia to stand trial. News of his arrest caught the attention of the world, and the Bolsheviks saw an opportunity to demonstrate the judicial fairness of their new regime. They filed formal charges against the baron, and a trial soon followed. Onlookers packed the courtroom as the tribunal of five party officials heard the evidence. Under cross-examination, Ungern neither refuted nor denied any of the claims or charges made against him. His trial, sentencing, and execution by firing squad were wrapped up within half a day. In his book *The Bloody White Baron*, historian James Palmer writes of Ungern's end: "When he learnt of his death, the Bogd Khan ordered prayers for his soul to be read throughout Mongolia. They were undoubtedly needed."[17]

One of the few surviving photographs of Ungern shows him seated, cap off, looking with resignation at the camera, as if his fate has already been revealed to him.

Baron Ungern, photographed in Chita, Siberia, around 1920, anonymous.

A hundred years later, most historians still regard Ungern as a madman-warrior-would-be-king, yet others believe the self-interest of Russian and Chinese writers has unfairly blackened his reputation. They point out that without Ungern's efforts Mongolia would have long ago been swallowed by China, like Inner Mongolia and Tibet. Others suggest that Ungern's use of excessive violence and fervent, imperialist style of nationalism with a strong anti-Semitic bent were a precursor and even a model for Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Nick Danforth, in a 2016 article titled "ISIS, but Buddhist," presents an intriguing comparison between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ISIS and Ungern's monarchical-supremacy movement.[18] Danforth posits that the movements shared a

number of characteristics, including a non-negotiable and uncompromising ideology promoted with the odd allure of a mysterious and messianic leader; brutal and prominent violence, with the death and torture of people considered contaminated or impure; the ability to attract and inspire devoted fighters internationally; the seeking of a state or empire of states; and a deep anti-Semitic prejudice.

In the aftermath of it all, any relief the Mongolians felt at the end of Chinese rule was short-lived. Although 1921 marked the end of both the Baron's butchery and Chinese occupation, it saw the beginning of what would be seventy years of Soviet control that would bring periods of even worse carnage to the people of Mongolia.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tenelhan

A craving gnawed at her insides, making the raptor rabid with hunger. This was the owner's plan: keep her lean, keep her hungry, keep her eager, more responsive, more willing to come immediately when called. But the extent of the hunger had repositioned his eagle's disposition from compliant to something else — a response more virulent and wild — a craving that negated months of preparations. The discipline, incrementally honed by the eagle hunter's reward-based training, was now overruled and replaced by an instinct for recrimination. In the eagle's mind, something or someone was going to pay.

With her owner's shouts of "Caw . . . caw," the handler removed the eagle's tomaga*, or hood. The golden eagle immediately entered a pre-attack mode, bobbing her head back and forth, pupils dilated, heart rate rising. She leaned forward and pushed off, her enormous wings catching the air. Of course she saw her horse-mounted owner below, dragging the lure tied to a rope. But she had no interest in this bit of fox-fur gimmickry. Instead she banked high, circled left, slowly climbing. Then she stopped. For a few seconds, she stayed in place, motionless. Then there was a collective gasp from the upturned heads in the throng below as they watched the eagle drop out of the sky and head towards a small group of onlookers. Braking with two and a half metres of outstretched feathers, her talons sank into the shoulder of a spectator. He toppled backwards, panicking and screaming, desperate to keep the eagle away from his face.*

After my first homestay, I said my goodbyes to Beken and his family, and Peka, my translator, and I travelled to the home of Tenelhan Bugibai, another very experienced eagle hunter. Dosjan Khabyl from Kazakh Tours, the outfitter who helped me with the details of my trip to West Mongolia, had arranged this second stay. I hoped that this next visit would offer a further insight into the eagle hunter's traditions, practices, and challenges. As luck would have it, Peka was related by marriage to Tenelhan and his family.

Tenelhan was seventy years old, tall and lean, with a grey Fu

Manchu moustache and beard. Unlike Beken's family, who were in their winter stone dwelling, Tenelhan, his wife, Azia, and their thirty-year-old son were still living in their *ger*, even though it was October. (Early fall weather is roughly the equivalent to December where I live in central Canada.) They told me they would move to their winter shelter within a few weeks, which gave me an indication of the severity of their winters. Anyway, I was delighted with the prospect of experiencing and sharing daily life inside the iconic tent of a steppe nomad.

The family had six hundred sheep and goats, some yaks, and 120 horses. Their *ger* was situated about thirty kilometers north of Beken's home, on a wide scrub-grass plain in the centre of an enormous flat valley. It was a fabulous setting. All through the province of Bayan-Ölgii, the landscape featured worn-round snow-clad mountains separated by large plains. It seemed that every eagle hunter in western Mongolia had a magnificent 360-degree view out his door.

Tenelhan had been an eagle hunter for fifty years, a tradition dating back six generations in his family. He told me he was the oldest of fourteen children, five boys and nine girls. His father, grandfather, and great grandfather were nomadic herders as well as renowned eagle hunters and horsemen. Acknowledging and emphasizing the skills of past generations was a recurring theme among all the nomads I stayed with. Tenelhan admitted to me that he was worried that six generations of eagle-hunting lineage could come to an end with him — another recurring theme.

His eagle was a three-year-old female, the sister of Beken's eagle, taken from the same parents but in a different year. The bird sat hooded and tethered on a low wooden perch beside the *ger*, day and night. However, throughout the night the raptor had company. Each evening hundreds of the family's sheep and goats were brought back to the immediate vicinity of the *ger* as a measure of protection from wolves and snow leopards. It was odd stepping outside in the early morning to see sheep and their lambs, goats and their kids, relaxed and chewing their cud around the *ger* and surrounding Tenelhan's huge eagle. Of course, the golden eagle was hooded.

Tenelhan, 2017, mixed media, 11 x 15 inches

Even more odd was the behaviour of one particular sheep. Each morning I'd find it standing against the bird with its snout nuzzled into the eagle's wing. If I approached anywhere within about eight feet, the sheep would feint a charge at me, so as to protect its adopted, blind friend. *How Disneyesque!* Had the golden eagle been mistakenly typecast as a heartless predator? Like the biblical account of the lion lying down with the lamb, could an eagle really become friends with a sheep?

When Peka awoke, I had her ask Tenelhan about this. Was it possible that his eagle knew that these sheep and goats were off limits and not to be harmed? Was it possible that the eagle and the sheep had actually forged a bond of friendship and mutual protection? After Peka's translation, Tenelhan looked at me as if I had lost my mind. He slowly shook his head. If the eagle's hood came off, he told me, one look at the sheep would likely trigger an attack-and-kill response. Right. This was Mongolia, not the World of Disney.

During the day I made some sketches, took notes, and visited other *gers* in the area. I did a couple of drawings of Tenelhan's eagle beside the tent, hooded and sitting on her perch. One of the drawings impressed and pleased Tenelhan so much that I gave it to him. I could safely stroke the eagle like a family pet, whether the hood was on or off. But without Tenelhan around, I stroked the bird only when her hood was on. I noticed while drawing her that she had an acute sense of hearing; even

hooded, she would always turn her head in the direction of the smallest sound, even the lead of my pencil moving across paper.

A number of things puzzled me about the relationship between golden eagles and nomad hunters. One was the business of leaving the eagle blindfolded practically all the time. Surely those high-functioning eyes were meant to see. And since nomads hunt with their eagles only in the winter, didn't the bird get bored, sitting all day, day after day, practically all summer? Wouldn't its muscles suffer some form of atrophy? Maybe these were anthropomorphic thoughts, but still, it didn't make sense to me.

Of course, my eagle-hunting host did not share my concerns. I was told that in the wild, golden eagles hunt for only a few hours a day, and only if they are hungry. In the summer, with the relative abundance of food, they either perch or sleep almost all the time. In the winter, with less food available and more energy required for warmth, they hunt a good deal more. The food intake required by a golden eagle is roughly half a pound per day, or one rabbit every four days. In the wild they have been documented going one week without food, at which point they might then consume two pounds of meat in one sitting. And I was told that an eagle is constantly using her muscles to stand on her perch while buffeted by the wind, so muscle atrophy is not the concern I imagined it to be.

With regard to being constantly hooded, the only explanation I got was that it keeps the birds calm. With their extra-keen eyesight, spotting even the smallest movement can trigger an instinctive and undesirable reaction. During the evening, many of the hunters I stayed with brought their eagle inside to eat, during which time they were often unhooded. I was told the birds' calmness inside the *ger* was the result of years of familiarity with the family and the setting.

. . .

Before travelling to Mongolia, I already had a fair amount of knowledge of nomadic people in Central Asia. Over a nine-year period in the early 2000s, I made yearly trips to the mountains of Ladakh, high in the central Himalaya. There, the nomads I

stayed with lived in tents, called *rebos*, in tight tribal groupings that ranged from one hundred to nine hundred people, depending on the tribe. By contrast, Mongolian nomads tend to live in small family groups of two or three tents, often with many kilometres between them and the next family grouping. And unlike the dark, square *rebos* of the Ladakhi nomads, woven from spun yak hair, the Mongolian *gers* are round and layered with felt (matted and compressed wool), adding to the tent's interior warmth. The tent exterior is covered in a light, white canvas. The *gers* found in the Bayan-Ölgii *aimag* of western Mongolia are distinctively Kazakh in style, being somewhat higher and larger than the *gers* in the rest of Mongolia.

The basic design and materials of the *ger* haven't changed since well before the time of Genghis Khan. A five-foot-high criss-crossed wooden lattice rings the entire circumference. From the top of the lattice wall are tied long, narrow wooden poles that run to a centre ring on the *ger*'s upper ceiling, like spokes to a bicycle wheel's hub. Each of the spokes is slotted into a drilled hole in the hub of the upper ring. For added support, a metal pole runs from the ring to the ground. Tenelhan told me that the design carries symbolic meaning: the upper ring represents the sun, the radiating spokes its rays, the criss-crossed lattice the mountains that surround them, and the floor is Mother Earth.

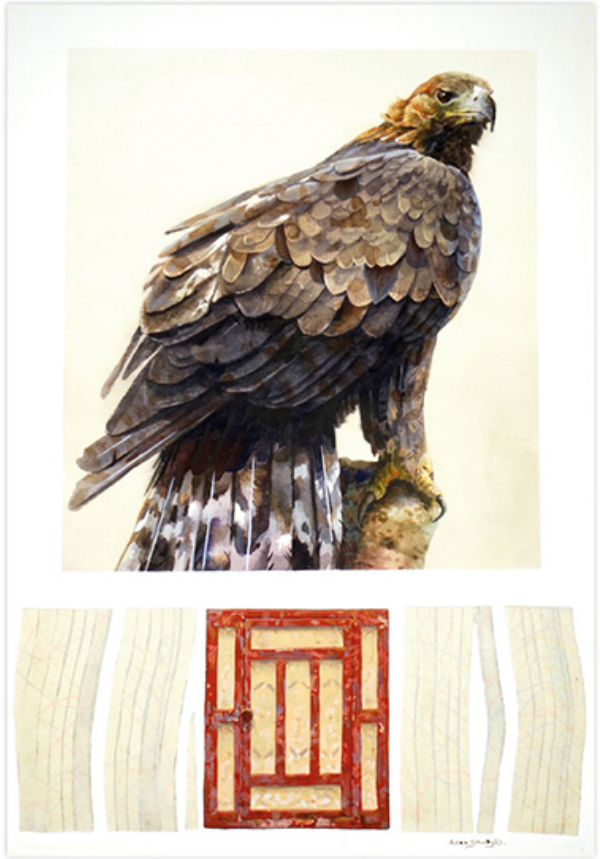
The diameter of a *ger* can range from nine to fifteen metres, and depending on the size, the design might require sixty, eighty, or one hundred spokes. The protective canvas covering on the outside is wrapped tightly with ropes. The door of every *ger* always faces southeast, keeping it in the lee of the prevailing winds and allowing the early-morning light to greet the occupants when they rise. Both the door and the threshold are made of wood and painted in vivid abstract shapes.

Upon entering Tenelhan's *ger*, I found that, like *Doctor Who*'s TARDIS, it looked bigger on the inside. The lattice walls were lined with brightly coloured blankets embroidered with repeating motifs that were all non-representational, typical of Islamic design. Hung in a row at the far end of the *ger* were a dozen or more framed horse-racing awards. There were no windows; the only light came from the centre-ring opening in

the roof. This opening was covered with a flap at night, to help retain any interior heat and keep out rain or snow. A small dung-burning stove in the centre of the *ger* was connected to a four-inch stovepipe that ran up and through the roof opening. If it was cold during the day the heat from the stove would escape, unless the flap was pulled across the hole. If the roof was covered during the day, the interior stayed fairly dark. To get warm, while I was there, people huddled close to the stove.

Azia's household items — such as pots, dishes, dairy products, and hunks of drying meat — were situated to the immediate right side of the entrance along the lattice wall. To the left was Tenelhan's domain, with bridles, saddles, satchels, and rifles. This left-right gender divide was the norm in all the nomad *gers*. The rest of perimeter was reserved for the beds. The beds were old, small, metal structures, with a stretched-out wire mesh for a sleeping platform. Under and around the beds were piled blankets, clothes, and other personal items. With all the assortment of things a *ger* held and facilitated, one could easily imagine the interior being a chaotic mess, but in fact almost all the *gers* I was in were spacious, clean, and well organized.

Although many aspects of nomadic life for Tenelhan and his family closely paralleled that of their Mongol ancestors, modernity had made a few significant improvements. A light bulb, powered by a small portable solar panel, had replaced lanterns and candles. Cellphones were ubiquitous. Motorbikes were preferred to horses among the younger generation, and renting or borrowing a large truck often replaced camels and yaks for transporting their belongings to new locations.



Entrance, 2017, mixed media, 22 x 15 inches

Still, by any twenty-first-century standards, the nomads had a startling absence of technology. Similarly, their possessions and resources were minimal, but they ingeniously employed what they had in multiple uses. It juxtaposed our own society's embrace of consumerism and throw-away stuff. Unlike the countless number of products we seem to need to get through the day, the nomads manage to a great extent with what they obtain from their animals.

- Most of their food (dairy and meat products)
- Hides (footwear, belts, bridles, and straps)
- Fuel (animal dung)
- Much of their transportation (camel, yak, and

horse)
•Their dwelling's insulation (wool felt from animal hair)
•Furs for clothing and wild game to eat (with the help of golden eagles)
•Sports and entertainment (eagle hunting and horse racing)
•Alcohol (made from fermented mare's milk)

Tenelhan and Azia, like all the eagle-hunting families that I stayed with, had the same general rhythm to their days. Although they tended to get up between eight and nine o'clock, later than I would have expected, they worked well into the evening. They drank their hot beverage of choice, chai, by the bowlful throughout the day. They fetched water from the river, perhaps a kilometre or two away (with all the animals herded around their *ger* every night, they camp away from their source of water to avoid contamination). Like all nomads on the steppes, in the winter they would have to break the ice for water, or haul ice and snow to their home. They would wash, if at all, using a minimal amount of water. When I wanted to wash my hands or face, a family member would pour from a kettle a little stream of water into my cupped hands, and that was that.

By about nine o'clock in the morning everyone was up and sitting around a table about sixty centimetres high, on little stools about thirty centimetres tall. Apart from the tea, breakfast consisted of hand-sized hunks of leavened bread fried in animal fat. They were topped with butter or heavy cream. There was always a bowl full of whitish-brown curd, dried harder than rock, which nobody seemed to eat.* The curd was mostly used as winter protein when their animals produced little or no milk. Also on the table, to add some colour, was usually a bowl of little candies, individually wrapped in bright cellophane. Lunch was exactly the same as breakfast.

After breakfast, there was always the milking of animals that didn't get done the night before and the chore of collecting and piling their dung to dry. One of the family members would have the daylong duty of herding the family flock to graze. This could be anywhere within a ten-kilometre radius from the

camp, even into the mountains. Every day of the year, regardless of snowstorms, sandstorms, rain, sleet, or extremes of temperature, the animals would be shepherded in search of food. In winter, the animals would have to paw through the snow to find bits of dried pastoral nutrition. The nomads' horses and big male yaks and camels were not herded but left on their own to roam and to fend for themselves day and night. When these animals were required, the nomads would ride off searching for them. This was the same severe, work-intensive pastoralism that had been practised on the Central Asian steppes for thousands of years. With such a commitment to so many animals, there was no end of work.

Tenelhan and Azia had raised eight children, one daughter and seven sons, who were grown and on their own, except for the youngest son. Janbolat was a tall, good-looking guy who still lived and worked with his parents. He was thirty years old but showed no interest in getting married. This presented a worrisome prospect for his aging parents, who would need additional family manpower to look after their animals and do assorted chores as the years went by. Bringing a young wife into the family household — with children hopefully not far behind — would enable Tenelhan and Azia to enjoy their old age with a lighter workload.

Marriage customs among the Kazakh nomads are similar to those of the nomads I lived with in Ladakh. There are three categories: love marriages, arranged marriages, and, lastly, the kidnapped-bride marriage. By Western standards, the latter sounds shockingly radical, and it is.

It starts with a couple announcing their upcoming marriage, but, secretly, another suitor of the bride is lying in wait. As the bride is on her way to the wedding, some of the suitor's male friends and/or members of his family forcibly kidnap her. She is then whisked back to the interloper's family home, where the women of the suitor's family go to work on the young woman. Under intense interrogation they will attempt to pressure her into realizing that going ahead with her marriage would be a terrible mistake. The family will try to railroad her into accepting this new husband and convince her that better opportunities await if she agrees to accept. In many cases the young bride might not know the first proposed husband any

better than this new one. And she might be impressed, even won over, by the new suitor's burning desire for her. If the girl agrees to marry the new groom, she will be asked to sign a declaration saying that she did so of her own free will. If this happens, the marriage ceremony will occur right then and there. If she holds her ground and steadfastly rejects the new marriage offer, she will be free to leave. The general consensus among people I talked to is that the kidnapped-bride scenario more often than not results in marriage.

Since my interpreter, Peka, was related to Tenelhan's family, Azia felt free to unload to her about Janbolat and his lack of interest in marriage. Janbolat had repeatedly rebuffed his parents' attempts to arrange a match. Peka later told me Azia was deeply concerned, seeing nothing but a hard future ahead for her and Tenelhan without added family help.

. . .

During my last day with Tenelhan and his family, they prepared a special evening meal in my honour. Early that morning, from the herd that milled around the tent, they singled out a particularly fat, good-looking sheep. With the help of Azia, Tenelhan laid the animal down on the ground, holding its front and rear legs, with its head on his lap. He talked to the animal softly while feeding it a spoonful of salt, an old Kazakh custom. He bowed his head, and muttering a prayer, he then lifted his cupped hands to his face in a washing motion. An artery in the sheep's lower neck was opened and its blood was collected in a metal bowl. The animal remained quiet and calm, its heart continuing to pump. It took about five minutes for its heart to stop and the sheep to expire. The body cavity was cut open, and all the organs and intestines were removed and placed in another container. The hide was easily pulled off and hung to dry. The carcass was butchered into a dozen big pieces that were hung inside the *ger* to dry. The climate is so arid that meat dries and partly cures without spoiling. At the end of it all there was no waste: bones, guts, organs, and even the hooves were saved.

For the nomads, the choicest part of the sheep is the head, and it was decided that the head would be served to me that

evening. It was boiled in a large pot over a dung fire for most of the afternoon, with the later addition of some potato and some handmade pasta. At dinnertime, other family members living nearby joined us for the meal. One of the arrivals, a large woman, expressed her displeasure at where I was sitting. As the guest of honour, I should have been at the far end of the *ger*, opposite, and facing the door.

The entire meal was served on a large platter, sixty centimetres in diameter. It was set in the middle of the table. Well, actually, it was placed close to me. I was asked to sit directly to Tenelhan's right. He was busy with a knife, cutting and pulling the flesh off the sheep's head and flicking the pieces back on to the outer edges of the platter. He flung the best pieces towards me. Everyone jumped in, careful to avoid Tenelhan's flinging knife, and using their fingers sorted through the greasy stew, finding and eating meat chunks, potato pieces, wide strands of pasta, and bits of gristle, muscle, brain tissue, cartilage, and other unidentifiable parts. If there were more typical sheep bones they would be cracked opened and the soft marrow sucked out and eaten.

Everything about the meal — the method used to kill the sheep, boiling it on a dung-burning stove, and the dinner table protocol — was a time-honoured custom, as if pulled directly out of the Mongol world of Genghis Khan.

In 1245, a sixty-five-year-old Franciscan monk named Giovanni di Plano Carpini travelled for two years into the heart of the Mongol empire. His book, *The Story of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars,* gives us a fascinating eyewitness account of Mongol culture. In the chapter "Their Good and Bad Customs, their Food and their Habits," he describes the evening meal. "One of them cuts and the other takes morsels with the point of a knife and a Tartar offers either more or less meat to another depending upon whether he wishes to honour him less or more," Carpini writes. "It is a great sin among them if any food or drink is allowed in any way to go to waste."[19]

. . .

Tenelhan would be a competitor in this year's Eagle Festival in Ölgii, only a few days away. This was the high point of the year

— an exhibition of skill and gamesmanship, the eagle hunter's equivalent to an all-star game, an open competition to determine who were the top eagle hunters and the best riders, and, above all, who had the best eagle. At night, before sleep, Tenelhan would listen to the news and the weather forecast from the radio station in Ölgii. The newscast was following a recent outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease that had infected many of the area's sheep and goats. This highly contagious viral disease threatened to scuttle the whole festival until the business community of Ölgii rose up in protest and warned the authorities of the significant economic loss of tourist dollars that the town would suffer if they cancelled the festival. A preventative solution was reached: before entering and after leaving the festival grounds, all vehicles would be required to drive through a deep disinfectant wheel wash.

Morning Hunt, 2019, mixed media, 6.5 x 9 inches

Tenelhan had a more personal worry. He was concerned that his female eagle might not be ready for the competition. Stroking her chest and stomach, he said she was carrying too much weight, which would hinder her response time to the baited lure contest. In addition, because he would travel by jeep to the festival, he would have to borrow someone else's horse for the competition. The long horse ride to the Ölgii festival and back would be onerous at his age.

Tenelhan having to borrow a horse to ride was a touch ironic. He owned 120 of them! Some were reserved for

hunting, others strictly for racing competitions. Given the awards that lined his *ger*, I wasn't surprised to hear that Tenelhan had consistently raised some of the area's best horses. Some of the races in Mongolia are marathons — thirty kilometres or more. These are highly competitive events and quite dangerous for both horses and riders, who stay the distance over uneven ground, without saddles. I was even more surprised to hear that the jockeys are always youngsters — anyone over the age of thirteen is regarded as too heavy to be competitive. Like with a host of things I witnessed, the sport is essentially unchanged from centuries ago.

Even with Tenelhan's passion for racing horses, owning 120 seemed like one hell of a lot. When I asked him why he had so many, he looked at me, and then at my interpreter, as if he didn't comprehend the question. Over time, I gradually came to understand that asking a Mongolian why he has so many horses is like asking the owner of a bush lot in Canada why he owns so many trees. Nomad horses, apart from a few that are used on a regular basis, look after themselves, free to roam the steppes as they please. Some particular horses are selectively used for hunting, and they are kept nearby and fed if need be during the long winter months. The others are regarded as completely independent of their owner's care, although they are not considered wild.

I had scheduled my Mongolian trip around the Eagle Festival. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I knew I couldn't go wrong spending a weekend in close proximity to a hundred or so horseback hunters and their golden eagles. Tenelhan's wife, Azia, and their son would remain at the camp to look after the animals while Tenelhan was gone. As Peka and I were waiting to be picked up by our driver to go to Ölgii, Tenelhan and Azia were preoccupied in an animated back-and-forth conversation inside their *ger*. Driving back Ölgii, I asked Peka what they were talking about. Peka said that Azia was arguing with Tenelhan about what supplies they needed from Ölgii. She wanted him to buy some household items; he wanted a box of bullets.

THE EAGLE FESTIVAL, 2016

In the careless freedom of his magnificent horsemanship, a

Mongol seems as much an untamed creature of the plains as does the eagle itself . . .

— Roy Chapman Andrews, *Across Mongolian Plains*

Every October, just as Mongolia's short summer is passing into a long, cold winter, a hundred or so eagle hunters converge on the frontier town of Ölgii. They come, some from two hundred kilometers away, across windswept plains and over ice-scoured passes in groups of twos and threes. A few arrive like Tenelhan, in jeeps and vans, with their prized possessions bundled like babies inside coats and blankets. Most, however, ride into town on horseback, like Western gunslingers, outfitted with heavy wolf and fox furs. Their horses are decked out in their finest gear: vibrantly coloured blankets and silver- and stone-studded saddles and bridles.

Like holstered six-shooters sitting on the hip, the riders' lethal *compadres* are carried on their right arm. As they ride through the streets, everyone stops, heads turn. The scene looked otherworldly, like something out of *Game of Thrones*.

Since 1999, the town of Ölgii (or Ulgii) and the Mongolian Eagle Hunters' Association has hosted the annual Eagle Festival, a competition to show off the prowess of these massive birds and draw attention to the hardy individuals who still engage in this ancient sport. Since its inception, interest in the festival has steadily grown, and UNESCO now recognizes it as a World Heritage cultural event. It is truly a one-of-a-kind tournament. Those lucky enough to attend witness an incredible interplay between horses, humans, and eagles.

The town of Ölgii sits sprawled across the valley floor beside the Khovd River, surrounded by the vast Altai Mountains and a secondary branch of mountains, the Shiveet Khairkhan range. Apart from the thirty thousand people who call Ölgii home, it has on occasion become a destination for adventurous Westerners who want an off-the-beaten-track place to hike, climb, ride, or paddle. Like many places throughout Mongolia, the town also hosts a Nadaam Festival, known locally as "*eriin gurvan naadam*" or "the three games of men." Held during the summer, this festival highlights Mongolian wrestling, horse racing, and archery.

The town itself has a barren wasteland feel to it, which an unremitting wind off the Altai Mountains accentuates. Walking

through Ölgii, squinting against the sting of blown sand, there is little doubt that if you're not at the ends of the Earth, you're pretty damn close.

Most of the buildings are low, one- or two-storey affairs, each seemingly trying to keep as close to the ground as possible. The weathered signs on storefronts are in Arabic, Kazakh Cyrillic, or English. The place has a rambling outdoor market and bazaar, stocked with a crazy menagerie of products from Russia, China, and Kazakhstan. For entertainment, I found tucked in among the alleyways a couple of outdoor pool halls where dozens of men played snooker on big, old, felt-covered tables, impervious to the wind-blown dust and the temperature.

Contradicting this frontier outpost overview is, at the town's centre, the Kazakh National Theatre. The Soviets erected this huge cement-block structure in the mid-1980s. The building contains a conflicting mix of features: a curving, grand-hall entry lined with photographs of distinguished directors, patrons, conductors, and government officials; a thousand-seat theatre with a balcony, a huge stage and layers of red velvet curtains; and a dank, dark, waterless washroom.

During the Eagle Festival, the theatre company puts on a show for the tourists. Dosjan, my resourceful outfitter, astonished me when he said that the theatre employs a full-time staff of eighty people (Ölgii's population is thirty thousand), including orchestra members, singers, musicians, dancers, and actors. This sort of cultural commitment is not unique to Ölgii. The Soviets built theatres in most small communities in Mongolia to entertain, unite, and propagandize the proletariat.

Dosjan had reserved a room for me in Ölgii. As one might imagine, accommodations in the town were limited, so rooms had to be booked well in advance of the festival. With the anticipated influx of tourists, hotels tripled their rates and still sold out. Client comments on TripAdvisor for Ölgii's two best hotels include "horror show," "awful," "hilariously bad," "abysmal," and so on. I'm not sure what these people expected to find in the outreaches of Mongolia. I stayed in both these hotels. The only oddity was that one hotel had no soap in the room, and I found out that wasn't by mistake: none of the rooms had soap. I concluded that, like Genghis Khan's Mongols,

the hotel owner believed that washing in water with soap was an affront to the gods — or an unnecessary luxury. I've stayed in hotels in the Himalaya that didn't have any running water, but a room without soap was a first. The other hotel mentioned on TripAdvisor had a different peculiarity. My single-bed room came with a complimentary supply of six condoms. Six?

The festival events took place over two days, at a site eight kilometres east of Ölgii, on a cordoned-off, horseshoe-shaped plain that lies beneath a ninety-metre southern mountain ridge. The festival competition included *Tiyn Tera*, a traditional game in which contestants pick a coin (actually it was a tied rag) off the ground while riding a galloping horse; *Buzhashi*, a tug-of-war over a goat pulled by two riders on horseback; and events such as camel racing and archery. All competitors were also judged on the authenticity of their traditional Mongol or Kazakh dress.

Long Riders, 2018, watercolour, 19.5 x 15 inches

The festival's two glamour events involved the hunters and their golden eagles. Both were highly competitive. For the first contest, each hunter, in turn, had his eagle positioned at the top of the mountain ridge with the owner on horseback down below, two to three hundred metres away. One at a time, each owner, holding a piece of raw meat aloft, called to the bird as the handler on the cliff removed the eagle's hood and let go of its ankle-tether. The other event involved calling your eagle to attack a mock fox dragged behind the owner's horse. In both events, the eagle was motivated by the prospect of a reward: a hunk of raw meat the rider carried. The judges tracked the time it took the eagle, once released, to land on the owner's arm when called and to land on the mock fox. The faster the eagle accomplished the task, the better the score.

Following these two lengthy eagle-calling competitions came another event that you probably have to be Mongolian or Kazakh to fully grasp. It is called *Kur Kuar*, and it involves a woman and a man (supposedly her partner) both on galloping horses, wearing traditional dress. The woman is chasing the man, who has supposedly done something he shouldn't have, and the pair is judged by how firmly she is able to beat her partner with her whip while in full gallop. This event involved about a dozen couples and naturally gave rise to great merriment among the crowd.

The festival was well organized. Events happened pretty much where and when they were scheduled. Yet it still retained a looseness befitting such a remote and strange cultural celebration. Tourists, eagles, horses, and hunters could freely intermingle everywhere, except out on the pitch of competition.

At the end of the final day of the festival, the judges presented awards to the winners of each competition as well as a single grand prize. To accept a medallion, all winning hunters arrived at the podium on horseback, their eagles on their arms. This year, Tenelhan, even without his own horse, was one of the main prizewinners. Seeing the reaction and the overwhelming response from the other hunters and the local crowd, it was obvious that Tenelhan was highly thought of not only because he was the oldest competitor but also one of the very best.

Festival Dress, 2018, mixed media, 14.5 x 14.5 inches

For me the festival was a wonderful gift. I was able to observe, photograph, sketch, and document what I wanted, as if I were a fly on the wall. While the eagle hunters were caught up in the swirl of activities, I was able to be among them without their self-consciousness that sometimes occurred in their homes.

After the festival, I flew back to Ulaanbaatar and then home. I felt good about the trip. From an artistic point of view, it had given me everything that I had hoped it would. And I'd left with a fond feeling for the country and the people I had met there — particularly, of course, the eagle hunters. Whether their hunting culture was sustainable in the long run, I didn't know, but what I saw demonstrated at the festival left me with a positive impression.

The other thing I appreciated about that first trip was that I didn't get sick. Compared to our standards of hygiene, the nomad way of living carries sizeable risks, at least for westerners. Their lack of sanitation, their close proximity to their animals, their food preparation and cooking practices, and their source of fuel are all radically different. Over many generations, they, of course, have evolved some powerful

antibody defences that we in the West no longer have. Fortunately, whether by luck or because of my constitution, I've continued to stay relatively healthy through my many years living with nomad families.

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* They and their Mongol ancestors used this dried cheese for protein on long journeys. Pieces would be soaked in water in a cylinder or leather bag, and the resulting beverage would be drunk during the day while riding.

PART TWO

CHAPTER FIVE

Return to Mongolia

It was mid-November when the spirits of the sky and the Earth unleashed their wrath. A blizzard of heavy snow intermixed with freezing sleet. It coated their nest, roost, and everything else in a layer of ice. Dropping temperatures and more snow, driven by a northern gale, followed. The storm raged for six days. By the end of the month, sixty centimetres of snow covered the ground and transformed the steppes into an arctic wasteland.

Another dzud *in December further punished any animals that might have survived. Already nightmarish temperatures plummeted to -50˚C at night. For the wolves, foxes, vultures, snow leopards, eagles, and vultures, available food wasn't the problem — it was everywhere. Millions of carcasses of sheep, goats, horses, and yaks were strewn across the landscape, frozen solid, half buried in drifts of snow. But for some scavengers the apparent bonanza of food was misleading. For the eagle, with its thin-walled mandible and weak jaw muscles, the frozen carcasses were almost impenetrable. The eagle pair, suffering from the cold themselves, had no choice but to abandon their territory and, like climate refugees, flee southwestward, across the Gobi Desert, looking to survive the winter in the foothills of the Himalaya.*

Hunting Grounds, 2018, watercolour, 15 x 28.5 inches

Back home in Canada, I began the process of developing artwork to convey the Mongolian story. The surreal world of the nomadic Kazakh hunters and their eagles presented a rich

tableau of ideas to draw from. Yet as the winter months passed and I reflected on the trip, my curiosity about Mongolia grew and my focus broadened beyond that of the eagle hunters and their way of life. I began reading and researching a host of related materials that probed topics I had no knowledge of. I berated myself for not inquiring more about a host of things while I'd had the opportunity.

For instance, how had Mongolia's seventy years under Soviet domination impacted my eagle-hunting friends? How did these independent and thoroughly self-reliant nomadic people function under Communist directives that came from Moscow?

I wondered, too, about the Mongolian religious beliefs in a historical context, from early shamanism to indoctrination in Tibetan Buddhism to flirtations with Islam and Christianity to an instituted atheism under the Soviets and back, again, to shamanism. How did this ancient belief still retain its power in a country that was in the process of modernizing?

And that first visit had left me puzzled about golden eagles, too. I had learned a lot about the use of the eagle in falconry, but why did this particular bird, as an animal and as a symbol, have such a captivating influence on people and cultures? For instance, why have so many nations throughout history adopted this particular bird as their state's emblem? Even where I live, in Ontario, the provincial government has recently decreed that any witness who testifies in a court of law has the option to be sworn in on a Bible or an eagle feather.

Was our connection with the eagle simply because humans have always dreamed of an ability to defy gravity and fly? But again, why have we focused on this particular bird? Is it because of the eagle's size? Its hunting prowess? Its intelligence? (Actually, I realized that I didn't know whether people regard these birds as intelligent or just instinctual.) And I was still trying to sort out in my own mind the ethics of people using eagles to hunt other wild animals for sport, even if it was part of their Indigenous tradition, and the value, if any, of an eagle-hunting culture in a postmodern, technological world. But I could learn only so much from halfway around the world. I needed to go back.

However distant my home is from Mongolia (it could hardly be farther), my Kazakh outfitter, Dosjan Khabyl, was just a

mouse-click away. By email, I asked him to book me a domestic flight from Ulaanbaatar to Ölgii and to please arrange an interpreter and another round of homestays with Beken and Tenelhan and, if possible, a handful of other eagle hunters.

I returned to Ulaanbaatar in the fall of 2017 and once again got a room downtown at the Lotus Guesthouse. My domestic flight to Ölgii was a few days later. On the day I was to fly, however, I received a late-morning knock on the door of my room. There was a phone message for me at the front desk. It was from Dosjan, in Ölgii. When I phoned back, I was shocked to hear him say that I had missed my flight. I told him my flight was that afternoon. He told me the flight had been rescheduled, moved up from the afternoon to very early that morning. In Mongolia, all domestic flights have to be purchased locally, so Dosjan had booked the Ölgii flight for me months earlier. When MIAT Mongolian Airlines changed the departure time, they contacted Dosjan, but he was unable to reach me (I don't carry a laptop or a cellphone). He discovered where I was staying only after calling every guest house in Ulaanbaatar. By the time he reached me, the flight had already arrived in Ölgii.

The next flight from Ulaanbaatar to Ölgii was a few days later, so Dosjan booked me on a flight the following day to Khovd, a town about 220 kilometres southeast of Ölgii.

The small plane was fully packed for the 1,300-kilometre, three-and-a-half-hour flight. From what I could tell, almost all the passengers were either Kazakhs or Mongolians. The plane's route was due west, crossing most of Mongolia. From a flying altitude of under a thousand meters, I could see the details of the rugged and mostly brown terrain below. The day was clear and crisp, with the only cloud cover on the distant horizons. Trees, grasslands, roads, and towns were absent. Mountains — burnished, worn, and sand-blasted — stretched across my view like a crumpled quilt. Vast and empty, the landscape looked as if it had never been touched or trodden on by a living soul; Mongolians proudly claim that one can traverse the entire 2,400-kilometre length of Mongolia on foot without having to cross a fence. Along the horizon, the higher elevations held what looked like permanent snow and sprawling icefields, which became powdered dustings in the mid-range foothills.

On the Mongolia steppes, the season we call fall can arrive and depart in a blink of an eye. On my return flight three weeks later, the brown quilt I'd seen on my way in was completely covered with a thick white blanket.

JA LAMA

> *. . . I am born of the great Mongols. My herds are on the Volga river, my water source is the Irtysh. There are many hero warriors with me. I have many riches. Now I have come to meet with you beggars, you remnants of the Oirats, in the time when the war for power begins.*
>
> — poem by Ja Lama

My screwed-up itinerary had an unexpected benefit. Just as Urga was the eastern centre of resistance against the Chinese, Khovd had been the hub of resistance in the west; at that time, in the early 1900s, it was known as Khobdo. I was glad to set eyes on a place that I had been recently reading about.

The leading protagonist in the western struggle for independence was a mysterious and infamous character named Ja Lama, also known as Dambiijantsan. He and his followers fought a run-and-gun guerrilla insurgency against Chinese occupation for thirty years.

Ja Lama was a notoriously ruthless, adventurous, and mystic warlord (another one). Not surprisingly, at one point Ungern, the Mad Baron, greatly admired him. Ja Lama's birthplace, his age, his origins, and even his credentials as a lama were and are a mystery. But he had a substantial reputation that encompassed an amalgam of fanatical traits: anti-Bolshevik, anti-tsarist, anti-Japanese, anti-Russian, and anti-Chinese. The only thing he appeared to be for were Mongolians, and even that was, at times, open to interpretation.

In 1912, Ja Lama led a Mongol force into Khobdo against the Chinese occupiers. The Mongols believed Ja Lama to be the reincarnation of Amursana, the Mongol warrior who bravely fought, and lost, against the first Chinese incursion back in the sixteenth century. Ja Lama was a populist whom some Mongolians revered as a near-deity and others reviled and feared. Like Ungern, Ja Lama had a deep sadistic bent and demonstrated it with a long list of bizarre behaviours, such as

pulling the hearts out of his enemies, and so forth. After a good deal of carnage, Ja Lama and his forces finally liberated Khobdo from the Chinese in 1912.

Ja Lama (Dambiijantsan), anonymous

Along with Ja Lama's liberating force, General Gen Dung Geng led another regiment in the taking of Khobdo. However, his own men so hated him that, during the fighting, they murdered him. The Mongolian authorities uncovered the mutiny but were unable to discover which soldiers were involved in the plot. The military leaders decided to arbitrarily pick three soldiers out of the regiment to stand trial for the murder. This item of Mongolian history interested me because the three were sent to Urga, convicted, and put into prison — the wooden box treatment described by Beatrix Bulstrode. In fact, she saw these three soldiers six months later, while she

was touring the prison, and discovered that they were to be executed the next day. Wanting to witness Mongolian capital punishment, Bulstrode details what followed.

The execution took place outside of the city and out of view of the sacred Bogd Khan Mountain, which, in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist belief, is a place where neither man, beast, fish, nor fowl can be harmed. A person who breaks this faith-based law is subject to internment in the box. A firing squad of three men arrived with a small contingent of officials on horseback and two ox carts carrying the three prisoners. Sixty or seventy Chinese were already there, in a joyful mood, seemingly delighted to witness Mongolians killing fellow Mongolians.

One of the shackled prisoners shouted insults at the authorities. Out on the open field soldiers tied them to stakes and, since their hands were shackled, fed them a last meal, tsampa and water. A lama, holding a picture of the Holy Prophet, spoke briefly to the condemned men. Immediately thereafter, from five metres behind the kneeling prisoners, three soldiers took aim and fired and then, according to protocol, fired two more rounds into the fallen prisoners. They left the bodies to the circling birds of prey.

Bulstrode noticed that one of the prisoners — probably not coincidentally, the one who had been shouting insults at the officers — was still alive, and she frantically called the soldiers back. Since this particular occurrence wasn't covered in firing-squad protocol, it took another fifteen minutes for the officials to figure out what to do. At last, one of the soldiers was assigned to put a final bullet into the wounded prisoner.

After the Chinese were ousted from Khobdo, Ja Lama and his men went completely rogue and spent the next several years rampaging through the district, robbing and plundering Chinese, Russians, Tibetans, Mongolians, and basically any travellers or merchants they felt like. Even the baron's people were not immune. Ungern's previous admiration for Ja Lama must have taken a hit when, in 1920, a delegation that he sent to Lhasa was stopped by Ja Lama's men while passing through Khobdo. Ja Lama decided to slaughter them all.

For ten years, Ja Lama managed to evade authorities, constantly moving with his men back and forth across the

borders of Mongolia, Russia, and China. In 1922, the Mongolian military leader Damdin Sukhbaatar, with the help of local authorities, was finally able to find and kill Ja Lama. As proof of death, or simply as a trophy, his head was sent back to Saint Petersburg and put on display in the Hermitage. It sits today behind a glass case, labelled "No. 3394, Head of a Mongolian."

BEKEN

> *But it did not all happen in a day, this giving over of himself, body and soul, to the man-animals. He could not immediately forego his wild heritage and his memories . . .*
>
> — Jack London, *White Fang*

It was late afternoon when the plane touched down at Khovd's little airport. My new interpreter and a driver met me. They had come all the way from Ölgii to pick me up, a five-hour trip. We drove around for a while to find a place that was open and sold water and then left for Beken's. Immediately after departing Khovd (or any other Mongolian settlement, for that matter), any signs of human habitation became exceptionally scarce. There were long stretches of travel where the view gave no indication of time. What I saw through the vehicle's window could have been from the past decade, century, or millennia.

I was glad to once again visit Beken and his family and to see them all doing well. Beken was very surprised and happy to see me — a highly unlikely return of a Western guest. He greeted me like a long-lost brother.

Years before, I had made eight yearly trips to Ladakh to stay with a nomadic tribe called the Kharnakpa. These visits gradually fostered the belief among them that there was a specific reason for my repeated returns. It had nothing to do with my artwork or writing. Rather, they viewed my return within the tenets of their Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. As their doctrine dictates, a person is continually reborn after death into a new life. They believe that if you have lived a virtuous life you will be granted an exemplary next life. They regarded me as living a particularly privileged life, so they concluded I must have been a very good person in my past life. And since I repeatedly returned to stay with their tribe, they figured I was

a fellow nomad in the time of their forebears and that my return visits clearly indicated I was missing that way of life.

I didn't expect that thought process from Beken. Anyway, he wasn't a Tibetan Buddhist. Rather than confessing the real reason I'd returned, I told him I came back because he had faithfully promised to find me a good Kazakh wife. Further to that, I reminded him that he had pledged to assemble five women for me to choose from, so where were they? As everyone else in the kitchen was laughing, Beken, straight-faced, flashed his perplexing hand signals, both palms outstretched showing all ten fingers. Translation: I hadn't given him enough notice. If I returned next year, he promised to assemble ten women for me to choose from.

Beken, his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and their baby had once again moved into their winter house. The house had a kitchen, two bedrooms, and another adjoining room. The design of the house had an ingenious adaptation for dispersing the heat from their dung-burning stove. It had a long interior wall that was hollow inside and was actually part of the chimney. This effectively circulated the flue heat inside the wall and into another room before going out the chimney. The stone and cement of this interior wall stayed warm even after the stove had long since died out. Since they burned only dung, this extra interior flue design didn't risk the build up of creosote, as would have been the case with wood fuel.

Outside was an open toilet that was simply a deep hole in the ground. Their source of water was a small river that cut through the middle of the valley a kilometre away. Their stone dwelling was built halfway up the west slope of a mountain ridge so that it was protected from the prevailing winds and provided an excellent view of the surrounding ranges. Only two other dwellings could be seen from their place, on the far side of the valley.

After Beken and Saule's workday was done, we typically spent evenings talking around the kitchen table and drinking bowl after bowl of milky chai. Beken couldn't understand why, after only two bowls, I didn't want more.

If the one-year-old was awake he, of course, became the centre of attention. The year before, when Nurali was a newborn, I watched the baby's nightly pre-sleep ritual. With

Nurali unclothed, his mother and grandmother positioned him close to the stove and then deeply massaged his arms and legs with oil, as if they were elastic. This continued for about twenty minutes while Nurali remained in an ultra-relaxed sleepy state. The newborn was then swaddled very tightly, with a careful layering of specific sheets and blankets, and secured on a small, crib-like table with straps so he couldn't move. Some stocks of dried herbs were ignited from the stove, with the smoke waved briefly back and forth over the young one so as to drive away evil nighttime spirits.

For the rest of us, the evening often ended with Beken bringing down his accordion or his *dramyin*, a stringed instrument about the size and shape of a violin that sounds much like a mandolin. The *dramyin* is widely used throughout the Himalaya and Central Asia and dates back into early Mongol history. The strings can vary in number from two to seven. The scroll at the top of the neck is traditionally carved with a horse's head. Both Beken and his son played in the evenings, often accompanying each other's traditional folksinging.

. . .

Beken's golden eagle was the same bird I met on my first visit, and I was delighted to be reacquainted with her. My presence no longer seemed to stress her, as she didn't screech at me when I passed her hut. Over the next day, Beken — who now was convinced that I had more than just a passing interest in eagle hunting — showed me some of the intricacies of caring for his eagle. For instance, golden eagles in the wild consume, as a matter of course, some of the feathers, bones, and fur of their prey. They regurgitate this roughage, and in doing so they facilitate a very necessary cleansing of the stomach. Because a captive eagle's diet is different, swallowing bits of fur or feathers is not likely to occur, so eagle hunters use other techniques to accomplish this internal cleansing. Beken uses a narrow sock the width of two fingers and the length of his fist, filled with bone ash. The eagle is forced to swallow the narrow bag and one to three days later, regurgitates it. Another method of stomach cleansing involved black tea poured into

the eagle's throat through a hollow bone.

An eagle hunter must also closely monitor the eagle's body temperature. The eagle should not be allowed to get too warm, so it can't be left hobbled in direct sun on a hot day. And in winter, if it is very cold, the eagle must be brought into the heated living space or fitted with a warming jacket.

Hunting with golden eagles is done only in winter, roughly a six-month period of the year — a protocol European travellers documented during the time of the khans. Usually the nomads hunt in small groups, from two to six hunters and, unlike any other falconers in the world, always on horseback. Sometimes they will go out for a day; other times they will be gone for a week.

Prior to a hunt, eagle hunters file their eagle's talons so they are razor-sharp. Hunters regularly run their hands over the eagle's body, particularly over the stomach and chest area, to carefully assess the bird's weight. The eagle hunts most effectively at a specific body weight. If the bird is even slightly overweight, its interest in hunting is diminished, and it might not want to hunt at all. If the eagle is too lean, too hungry, it can become overly aggressive and uncontrollable. Like fine-tuning the carburetor on a race car, adjusting the bird's food intake requires experience and care.

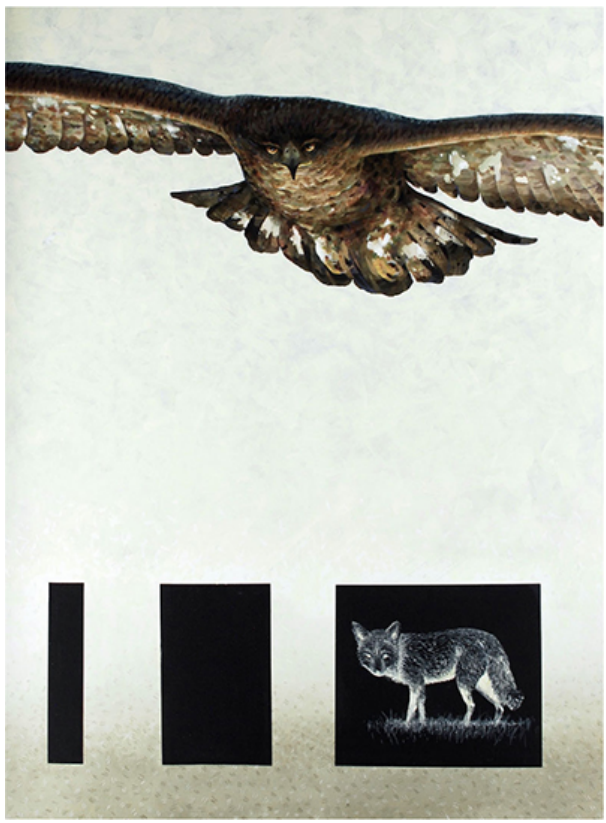
The preferred pre-hunt meal given to the eagle is usually strips of sheep's lungs that have had the blood washed out, leaving the meat somewhat filling but not really satisfying. This meal is meant to leave the eagle with an appetite for richer and fresher food. Although golden eagles hunt foxes, the hunters avoid feeding fox meat to their birds; that is, apart from a small reward immediately after a successful fox kill. Fox meat is too rich and oily for a regular diet.

I asked Beken what he considers the most important quality a hunter needs to successfully train a golden eagle. He said there has to be a friendship and respect between the eagle and the owner. But more importantly, he said, as if responding to a question about raising a young child, "You need patience."

One morning, over the customary bowls of milky chai, I asked about the fate of the young male decoy on the mountaintop, the one we had visited the year before. Beken replied that the eagle was still there. I was very surprised to

hear him say that, and doubly so for what he said next. His trap had caught five female golden eagles over the past year. They were young birds, only a year or two old. Beken sold them to local eagle hunters at 500,000 *tugriks* each, or about $200. They were sold untrained. He said he had standing orders for such birds.

That afternoon we rode the three kilometres across the river and up the far-side mountain slope so I could see the captive decoy again. As we climbed, a large golden eagle drifted and circled high above us. Looking up, I asked Beken if this was a possible candidate for his trap. Beken regarded the bird briefly and said it was a fully mature female and would likely know to stay clear of the lure, seeing it as an obvious contrivance.



Fox Hunt #1, 2017, mixed media, 29 x 21 inches

The hobbled male was bigger and more mature-looking than

the year before and didn't go berserk when we arrived. Beken was using another dead rabbit lure, and the catching mechanism was now a leghold trap with wrapped cloth softening its jaws. The trap was buried under a layer of dung out of reach of the male and right beside the "new" dead rabbit. Before we moved on, Beken left half a rabbit for the male, who refused to eat it until we had gone.

During the winter, Beken told me, he had taken the young male eagle back to his home and housed it inside the outbuilding but not in the same enclosure as his female. Together, the male and the female (when she wasn't hunting with Beken) consumed the equivalent of one whole rabbit every other day throughout the winter. This, given the considerable effort needed to hunt for so much wild meat, further reinforced eagle hunting's importance to Kazakh culture.

The memory of the male eagle tied to the mountain had stayed with me after I left the year before, and over the entire winter. My heart went out to this poor bird. In one sense, I could rationalize it as simply part of a harsh life for both man and beast in such a severe environment. I could see that it also demonstrated the genius found in a traditional culture that combined homegrown technologies and human ingenuity to secure food and furs as a means of survival. On the other hand, I had an overriding feeling that this was a jarringly cruel and inhumane method of hunting. Hunting wild animals is one thing, but this was convoluted hunting in the extreme. That is: catch and maintain one wild animal as a means to catch and maintain another wild animal as a means to catch and kill a third wild animal.

BIRD BRAIN

> *. . . appreciate the complex cognitive abilities of birds in their own right and not because they look like some aspect of our own.*
> — Jennifer Ackerman, *The Genius of Birds*

A golden eagle's impressive physical attributes were relatively easy to see, but I wondered about the intelligence of these reclusive birds. Up until recently we assumed that since birds have small heads, and small head equals a small brain, they

must have minimal cognitive ability — the foundation for the insult "birdbrain." Over the last two decades there has been a lot of research probing the mental capacity of birds. Those studies increased our understanding of bird intelligence by quantum leaps.* Their findings challenge and undo centuries-old thinking that classified birds as instinctual and lacking the ability to problem-solve and learn.

When researchers compared brain size and body size, many birds' brains were in the same proportion to their body as the brains of what we consider intelligent mammals, including some primates. Furthermore, it is now understood that brain size alone isn't a good measure of intelligence. The brain of a large mammal, for example, might be a hundred times bigger than a chickadee's, yet the mammal might not be smarter. A large building needs a large furnace to produce the energy to keep it warm. But a much smaller building can be kept just as warm with a small furnace. For larger animals, much of their brain capacity is taken up with the job of controlling a bigger building, with a larger system of nerves, veins, muscles, organs, digestion, blood flow, etc.

Biologists point out that some birds have cognitive abilities that in certain areas far exceed our own, such as, during the winter, retrieving thousands of seeds hidden half a year before, or the ability to find a specific location, a continent away, when they migrate south and return north. Researchers have documented instances of birds using tools, learning and teaching one another, and communicating a wide range of thoughts, using an impressively wide vocal vocabulary.

Some birds are clearly a lot smarter than others. This is evident every morning when I walk out the door with seeds to put in my bird feeder for my cold-weather friends who have decided to spend the winter in central Canada, including jays, cardinals, mourning doves, juncos, sparrows, finches, chickadees, nuthatches, and three or four different kinds of woodpeckers. Even though these birds have watched me put food into the feeder in the same place at the same time of day for months, if not years, they all take flight, with multiple calls of alarm when they see me approach — except for one: the diminutive chickadee. Not only does it not flee, but it arrives at the feeder to greet me, always with its chickadee calls,

announcing to its chickadee friends that breakfast is being served.

Jennifer Ackerman's excellent book *The Genius of Birds* describes at length the cognitive abilities of the black-capped chickadee. This particular bird has one of the most sophisticated and exacting methods of communication of any land animal. Apparently, those *dee, dee, dee* calls are not arbitrary at all. Among other things, the number of *dee*s and the space between the *dee*s indicate to other chickadees whether a food source has been discovered, whether a predator is on site, and, if there is, whether it's on the ground, in the air, or in a tree.

The collective results of a host of studies and experiments testing the intelligence of birds have astounded the ornithological community. Corvids, for example, have the ability to solve complicated puzzles, find and use tools, communicate complex information to each other, learn and adapt, and distinguish different people through facial recognition. They also have a sophisticated capacity for memory storage that includes instant recall. Some researchers have concluded that the crow's reasoning ability equals that of a chimpanzee or a six-year-old child.

Bernd Heinrich's *Mind of the Raven* documents some of the extraordinary behaviour of another corvid, the raven. The book details the raven's ability to reason, both in its natural habitat and in experiments in controlled settings. One particular raven in the book illustrates the close relationship that can develop between a corvid and a person.

In 1993 Heinrich travelled to Germany, following up on a letter he'd received from a doctor named Klaus Morkramer. Morkramer's letter told Heinrich that he had a pet raven named Jakob. The raven actually lived with Dr. Morkramer in his apartment. Heinrich knew that a domesticated raven is quite rare, mainly because they possess a very domineering personality, making a raven-human live-in relationship nearly impossible. Heinrich goes on to write:

> Klaus told me that whenever he gets mail, Jakob demands to have a fair portion of it. Although he is never denied, he hops around violently, giving loud

> frustration calls when his keeper comes into the room with a handful of mail and doesn't immediately deliver some to him. As soon as Jakob is handed a few pieces of junk mail, he quietly sits down and gets busy shredding them into little pieces. This task occupies him for about a half hour.[20]

During the note-taking interview with Klaus Morkramer, Jakob kept a close eye on what Heinrich was doing. As the interview went on, Jakob hopped closer and closer. Then, as Heinrich was busy writing, without warning the raven jumped up and hammered his beak into Heinrich's thigh. Before Heinrich knew what had happened, the raven moved in for another strike. Heinrich, in a panic, looked at Morkramer for an explanation or help. The bird's owner calmly shrugged and informed Heinrich that Jakob wanted his note-taking pen.

. . .

I have been an interested observer of birds all my life, but before Mongolia my amateur observations unfortunately hadn't included any golden eagles. I did, however, have an experience that illustrates the exceptional intelligence of birds, or at least of corvids.

Twenty-one years ago, I bought a place in the country that had an outbuilding I didn't want. As I was crawling around its underside, deciding how best to take it down, I saw that an Eastern Phoebe flycatcher had built a nest up in one of the trusses of the floor joists (there was outside access to the crawl space). Eggs were already in the nest so I decided to forgo the building's demolition until later.

Although I boarded up the crawl space that winter, the returning flycatchers were not deterred. They like buildings. The following spring, they had entered the main part of the structure through a broken window and built a nest on top of the moulding frame above the entry door. The nest already contained five little glowing-white eggs by the time I spotted it.

I didn't want to wait another year to take down the building, but nor could I destroy their nest. I decided that I would try to move the nest out of the building incrementally with the eggs

in it. I carefully cut and secured the piece of drywall and wooden moulding that the nest was built against and attached the whole thing to a wooden tripod that I had constructed. I would work for only five minutes at a time, then leave for an hour or so, allowing the parents to return to the nest. This went on for a few days.

With the nest secured to the tripod, I very gradually, day by day, shuffled the whole apparatus out the door. Each day the parents continued to return to sit on the eggs, reassuring me this was a feasible plan. When the nest was finally outside, a few paces from the building, I put a pyramid-shaped plastic cover over it, for protection from the elements and to hide the eggs from predators, but left an access opening on the underside of the covering so the parents could get to the nest. During this whole time, the adult flycatchers continued to come and go, spelling each other off while incubating the eggs. I was proud of myself for saving this little clutch of soon-to-be-active flycatchers.

Every day or two I'd climb a stepladder and check to see if the eggs had hatched yet. Then one day I looked and there were four eggs in the nest instead of five. Hmmm . . . that's funny. Had I counted wrong? A few days later there were three, then later two, and then only one egg remained.

As the eggs were disappearing day by day, I naturally spent more time observing the situation from my kitchen window. I soon figured out the culprit was a large crow. I didn't see any way I could barricade the egg-stealer's access to the nest and still enable the parents to get in. I resigned myself to the fact that saving even one flycatcher egg wasn't going to happen.

A few days later I checked the nest again, expecting to see it eggless. But the one egg was still there, with the parents continuing to care for it. I rechecked it again the following day. What? The nest now held two eggs — two *different* eggs, the white flycatcher's and a larger and greyish-brown egg. It belonged to a cowbird.

The cowbird is a role model for all irresponsible, absentee, don't-give-a-damn parents. It's a true nomad, historically a follower of bison herds across the North American plains. Its need to travel constantly conflicts with any sort of typical family-raising behaviour. Instead the cowbird deposits its eggs

in another bird's nest, trusting the egg and chick to be cared for by the unsuspecting adoptive parents. The behaviour is called brood parasitism. Cowbirds will deposit up to forty eggs in a year, one a day, into different nests. The eggs have been discovered in nests ranging from hummingbirds all the way up to hawks.

A day later, I checked the nest again. It now held only the flycatcher's white egg. A day later it had two eggs again, one white, one greyish-brown. Next day, only the white one. What the hell? Was I going crazy? Not only had my bird-caring efforts failed but somehow my plastic-pyramid covering had become a fulcrum for some really weird shit.

In truth, of course, it was simply the crow playing puppet master with the cowbird, the flycatchers, and me. The crow took the flycatcher's eggs except the last one, knowing that the cowbird would never leave its egg in an empty nest. After the cowbird deposited its egg, the crow stole it, again leaving one flycatcher egg in the nest to encourage another cowbird egg. The crow knew perfectly well that leaving the cowbird's egg and taking the last flycatcher egg would end its daily egg-delivery system. It was an amazing demonstration of a bird's foresight and intelligence. Researchers call it delayed gratification, a discipline of the mind that many humans find quite challenging.

Regarding the building: it came down that summer. As for the flycatchers, they relocated the following spring inside another of my outbuildings. They and their offspring have nested annually on the seat of my hanging-upside-down canoe, a boat I haven't used for the last twenty years.

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Finished and Complete, 2018, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

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Louis Lefebvre, a professor of biology at McGill University, is a specialist in avian behaviour. Using research from others as well as his own studies, he compiled a list of what he considers to be the cleverest birds. At the top, not surprisingly, are corvids, such as crows and ravens, followed closely by parrots. Below these two cognitively endowed species come raptors, woodpeckers, and chickadees.

Observing, documenting, and assessing the intelligence of raptors in their natural habitat is difficult. Golden eagles are particularly challenging because of their preference for seeking out huge and remote territories; this has made long-term observations of their behaviour spotty at best. And they are leery of people, more so than most birds, and willing to abandon a nest, sometimes after a single distant incursion.

But some observations underline their cognitive abilities. Eagles and hawks are known to see forest and grass fires as a hunting opportunity, picking off the panicked and fleeing animals. Further to that comes an amazing observation from the Aboriginals of North Australia, an account confirmed by ornithologists. They report that at least three different birds of prey have actually started new forest and grass fires to facilitate easier hunting.[21] Two kinds of kites and a brown falcon have been seen picking up burning sticks with their beaks and talons from one fire location and dropping them in

another to spread a new fire. The songs and stories of the Aboriginal people tell of the firehawk, or as they say, *Karrkanj* or "troublemaker."

Researchers consider many factors when assessing bird intelligence. One is cooperative hunting; that is, birds that employ and communicate various strategies for different prey. It indicates sophisticated communication skills and a problem-solving process, and it's something golden eagle pairs do regularly.

Simon Ducatez, an evolutionary biologist, describes how birds that are generalists, with greater dietary flexibility, require higher cognitive skills for finding or for hunting their varied foods. This generalist label applies to some birds of prey, while others, such as snowy owls, are specialists, requiring a more specific diet found in more specific environments. The golden eagle, with its varied habitat and prey, is foremost among raptor generalists. Success requires a variety of problem-solving abilities for each different hunting tactic. The golden eagle is a testament to the generalist's adaptability to survive in a changing environment.

Many factors other than intelligence decide whether a species is successful in terms of its population growth or evolutionary longevity. In *The Genius of Birds,* Jennifer Ackerman cites a case study of two Caribbean birds, the Bajan bullfinch and the closely related black-faced grassquit. Their appearance is almost identical, but the bullfinch is known to be clever, fearless, and opportunistic, whereas the grassquit is a timid, skittish, and highly conservative bird. The most interesting part of the study is that over time it was found that the seemingly more intelligent Bajan bullfinch fared no better in its rate of survival or its rate of reproduction than the grassquit. The bullfinch, it happens, had as many disadvantages as it had advantages compared to the grassquit. The study reminds us that in nature higher cognitive ability is not necessarily better.

Research shows undeniable commonalities between the brain function in birds and humans. But is this research, focused on quantifying avian intelligence, an exercise in anthropomorphizing, measuring the bird's cognitive abilities with a human yardstick? "It's a natural human impulse to

project our own experience on the nature of other creatures, but this can and does lead us astray," Ackerman writes. "Birds are class *Axes*; we are *Mammalia*. And in that branching is a mountain of biological difference."[22]

As regards our assessment of animals, the naturalist Henry Beston in his book *The Outermost House* observes:

> We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and err greatly. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world order and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear.[23]

MECCA

When the shadows of this life have gone
I'll fly away,
Like a bird from these prison walls I'll fly
I'll fly away.
— Albert E. Brumley, "I'll Fly Away"

After five days with Beken and his family, my interpreter and I travelled once again to visit Tenelhan and his wife, Azia. It was late fall, but just as before, they were still in their summer *ger*. Their location, however, was different. They were way back, deep in a roadless, goat-pathless valley reached after four hours of butt-kicking travel over boulder fields, through knee-deep snow and slush, and across semi-frozen rivers with water almost up to our vehicle's windows. This time the tossing and tumbling was inside an old UAZ-469, a Russian-made jeep and a smaller version of the previous year's "loaf of bread."

Gone with the Wind, 2018, watercolour, 14 x 21.5 inches

Tenelhan greeted us warmly and invited us in for the customary bread and butter and chai. Tenelhan caught me up on the year that had passed. He had gone to Mecca the previous winter. Even though I knew the Kazakhs of the Bayan-Ölgii *aimag* were Muslims, the news still surprised me. I didn't see much evidence that he or the other Kazakh nomads were particularly devoted followers of Islam. Besides that, just getting to Mecca and back was a twenty-thousand-kilometre return trip, via Istanbul. But Tenelhan was following the Islamic edict that says every good Muslim needs to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once. But obeying the wishes of Allah cost Tenelhan his golden eagle, and nearly his life.

While walking around the seventh-century Kaaba — the high, squared granite structure at the heart of the Sacred Mosque — in 50°C heat, Tenelhan collapsed. He credits two strangers walking beside him with saving his life. He was rushed to a medical centre, nourished and rehydrated intravenously, and remained under medical care for three days.

During the time he was away, he left his two-year-old eagle (not the one he took to the 2016 Eagle Festival) in the care of Azia and their son. One day, while the eagle was outside on her perch, a ferocious windstorm swept across the land. Even though a rope tethered the bird to a steel spike, the strong gusts filled the eagle's huge outstretched wings and lifted it off its perch with enough force to pull the spike right out of the ground. Within moments, the eagle, airborne and still tied to the spike, was gone with the wind.

Had Tenelhan or another knowledgeable eagle hunter been there, they would have brought the bird inside. I expressed my condolences to Tenelhan. Compounding the loss was the knowledge that the eagle stood no chance of surviving, dragging a steel spike behind it. Tenelhan said that of the twelve eagles he has had over fifty years of eagle hunting, only three or four were really exceptional hunters, and the one he lost was one of them.

But the year had brought some good news, too. Tenelhan had bought a one-year-old female eagle, one of the ones Beken had caught in his trap. The other good news they relayed to us was that their son Janbolat was to be married in another few weeks. Tenelhan and Azia were delighted for their son, of course, but also for the fact that they would soon have some much-needed help in running the family household. The wedding plans were well underway, and Tenelhan asked if I might be able to attend; unfortunately, I was scheduled to fly home just prior to the celebration.

As Tenelhan was telling me this good news, he added, "I'm sixty-eight, and it's about time my son gave me some grandchildren." I looked at my translator and said, "Wait a minute! He told me last year that he was seventy!" I added, "Hey, this going to Mecca, it has more benefits than I thought!"

My interpreter translated what I said, which precipitated howling laughter from both Tenelhan and Azia.

Months later, back in Canada, I found out that the pre-wedding happiness was short-lived. I had emailed Peka, my interpreter on my first trip to Mongolia, to ask about the wedding, thinking she might have attended since she was related to Tenelhan's family by marriage. She wrote back that Janbolat's wedding never took place. With no other explanation, I was left to assume this marital union might have been more the parents' idea than their son's.*

. . .

Following my visit to Mongolia the year before, I did a number of mixed-media pieces on paper and some oil paintings on the eagle hunting theme, and I had brought with me a number of eight-by-ten glossies of these paintings to give to various eagle

hunters. I gave Tenelhan one depicting him holding his eagle. I told him to pick another one that he liked. He laid out all the images on the floor of the *ger* and for ten minutes he very carefully considered them all before choosing the one he liked best.

After leaving Tenelhan and Azia, we drove for three or four hours until we came to the winter home of Leikhan, Tenelhan's younger brother. The plan was for the three of us (driver, translator, and me) to spend the night and dine with him and his family, even though Leikhan and his wife didn't know we were coming — they had no cell reception where they were. For me, this felt awkward, arriving perhaps as unwanted guests. But I was assured that an unannounced visit, for a meal or to stay overnight, was common on the Mongolian steppes. The year before, Peka and I had been wandering the steppes one afternoon when she suggested we rest and have some tea. She'd knocked on the door of an isolated mountainside dwelling, but there was no answer. A short distance away the woman of the house was doing outdoor chores. After a brief exchange with Peka, the woman asked us inside and immediately started preparing food and chai. After we left, I asked Peka how she'd come to know this woman living in such an isolated place. She said she had never met her before.

Leikhan, 2018, watercolour, 12 x 13 inches

Like Tenelhan, Leikhan was an eagle hunter and a horse guy. He had eighty horses and two golden eagles. Both of his eagles had been obtained at one or two years of age, caught in a trap, like the birds Beken had caught. Leikhan continued to talk about eagles, stressing the importance of obtaining a hunting bird at the right age. I had already shown Leikhan the photos of the paintings I'd done from the year before so he could also choose a couple to keep. He told me that he could tell a good hunting eagle simply by its appearance. Then he asked to see the photos of the paintings again. He spread the eight-by-tens out on the floor and said, "I'll tell you which ones are good hunters and which aren't." He quickly assessed the images and picked out which were the better eagles. Simply by their head shape he could tell the males from the females. He told me the head, beak, and eyes are important features but so are the shape and size of the wings. The two images he kept he assessed as being the two best hunters.

We talked about the loss of Tenelhan's eagle. Leikhan told me he wished his brother had given him the bird to look after in his absence. As delicately as I could, through my interpreter, I asked if he could describe how his brother felt after losing his eagle.

"Was it like losing a favoured horse?" I asked.

"Like the loss of a child."

Surprised by the response, I looked for clarification. Through my interpreter I asked, "That's meant to be a figure of speech, right?"

Leikhan slowly and thoughtfully shook his head and said, "No."

THE SOVIETS

When there's a person, there's a problem.
When there's no person, there is no problem.
— Joseph Stalin (attributed)

One of the reasons I returned to Mongolia was to find out from some of the older eagle hunters about living under USSR governance. Tenelhan, for example, had spent his first forty-

five years under Soviet control. I was intrigued by this, as the two — nomadic life and communist ideology — seemed totally incongruous to me. I was very curious how this great eagle hunter and horseman had fared.

One evening after supper I asked Tenelhan about his early childhood and life as a younger man in a communist country. Without saying anything, he got up and retrieved an old, worn folder from under a pile of papers beside his bed. In the light of a single bulb, powered by a battery connected to a small solar collector, he slowly leafed through yellow-tinged, brittle documents: page after page of dated animal ledgers listing sheep, goat, camel, horse, and yak in separate columns, annotated with their ages and weights. There were pages for newborn animals, each with a growth chart and weight ledgers for wool and pashmina (the fine under-fleece of the goat), for yak and camel hair. Other ledgers kept track of milk, yogurt, and butter production. Some pages were stamped with a seal and signed at the bottom by a party official. Interspersed with these documents were a number of Soviet commendations and citations given to Tenelhan for excellence in animal husbandry. Each award was written in Cyrillic script under a letterhead with what was then the new Mongolian emblem — a horse and rider between a red star and the iron wheel of industry.

Tenelhan told me that for a period of time in the 1980s he didn't lose any newborn animals to disease or starvation, and for that he was named the top herder in Mongolia. This didn't surprise me. Tenelhan was obviously skilled in animal husbandry, and he was very proud of the fact that his skills were acknowledged and rewarded under Soviet rule. All the eagle hunters I stayed with had an acute understanding of their animals, but I thought Tenelhan to be exceptional, an animal savant. Sheep, goats, yaks, camels, horses, or eagles — it didn't matter, he seemed to be able to read their minds.

One year, he and a number of the USSR's best herders were brought to Moscow to receive award commendations. For Tenelhan, this meant a two-day journey to Ulaanbaatar and another six days by train to Moscow, a total of 7,300 kilometres — fourteen days of travel and a 15,000-kilometre round trip. In the folder were articles from both Mongolian and Soviet newspapers reporting on the Moscow award ceremony

and the background of each honoured herder.

. . .

After 1921, Mongolia found itself under the guiding influence and, later, the strict control of the Soviet empire (although it was never officially part of the USSR). A communist-leaning Mongolian People's Party was put in place in Ulaanbaatar, providing the USSR with a direct conduit to and influence over its southern neighbour.

Up until then, Mongolia had been a feudal appendage of the ruling Qing Dynasty in China. Historically, Mongolia's power and wealth were firmly placed in the hands of old nobility, the Chinese, and the Tibetan Buddhist clergy. During that time, decisions regarding the Mongolian economy and governance came from the edicts of Chinese emperors. If local decisions were to be made, they were just as likely based on the visions of monastic lamas and oracles as government rulings. The Tibetan Buddhist lamas made up 20 per cent of the country's population and remained content with the status quo as long as their age-old customs, spiritual beliefs, and monastic life remained undisturbed. The Soviets' overt influence, at least initially, benefited from the deep resentment the Mongolians held towards China after three hundred years of domination.

The Soviets had a sizable task ahead of them to modernize this antiquated and severely underdeveloped country whose population as a whole was either indifferent or averse to change. Mongolia had no road system, no railways, no navigable rivers or ocean-port access. It had no industry or national currency. In many ways, it was still a medieval trade-and-barter economy, a place where illiteracy was the norm and where a structured public school system was nonexistent. With few trained doctors and appalling habits of hygiene, diseases often spread through the country in epidemic proportions. Life expectancy was low and infant mortality was high. A 1915 study found that 40 per cent of children died within the first four years of life. That, along with the large proportion of males becoming celibate Tibetan Buddhist lamas and severe winters culling both people and animals, flat-lined Mongolia's population for centuries.

Transforming a country of wandering herders into state-controlled socialists was fraught with difficulties. The nomadic herders like Tenelhan lived isolated lives in small family groups with no appointed tribal leaders and no organization to speak for them. The Soviets had no easy way to identify or even find them, let alone organize them across 1.5 million square kilometres. Most nomads just wanted to be left alone anyway.

At the end of the Russian Revolution, the Bolshevik government declared that the people of the state had a right to determine their own destiny, including the right to secede and form a separate state. With this as the official doctrine, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Mongolia went reasonably well, at first. Bogd Khan retained his role as Mongolia's head of state, at least in name. But after his death in 1924, the Soviets had no interest in replacing him with another religious leader. Instead, the Soviets appointed Peljidiin Genden, who served as Mongolia's president until 1927 and then as prime minister from 1932 to 1936.

The revolutionary mantra of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* — "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" — gradually gave way to imperialist ambition. By various means, the Soviets began exerting constant pressure on the Mongolian government to ensure it stayed pro-communist and closely aligned with the USSR. In 1930, Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, commenced a grand plan to reform all of Mongolia's antiquated structures and institutions. This included a radical collectivization of Mongolian agriculture and animal husbandry. It also called for the shifting of all lands, produce, and livestock from private to state control. This particularly affected the Mongolian nobles and the sizable land holdings of the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.

Stalin's abrupt dictate was a shock to the system, a system that for centuries had drifted along unchanged. The Soviet directive concerning collectivization didn't easily mesh with Mongolia's age-old methods of animal husbandry. During the confusion created by the proposed transition and the herders' pushback that followed, it's estimated that in the first year alone, eight million animals died of neglect, winter weather, and/or scarcity of food. With economic calamity close at hand,

the Mongolian herders revolted, and the Red Army was called in to quell the protests. The Soviets decided to back off from their aggressive program of collectivization, at least temporarily. It would be ten years before the Mongolians' inventory of domestic animals rose again to their pre-Soviet levels.

In keeping with Stalin's overarching policy of de-emphasizing all religious institutions and the privileges given their practitioners, the Soviet Union began the work of abolishing Tibetan Buddhism throughout the country (as well as Islam in West Mongolia). In the early 1930s, the Soviets directed Mongolia to enact laws that would put an end to religious teaching in school and would halt the practice of children entering monastic life. New, burdensome taxes were levied on all monastery properties, and lamas were no longer exempt from military service.

These new policies precipitated another cultural upheaval and more public resistance. Peljidiin Genden, now Mongolia's prime minister, was one of the leaders of the resistance and one of the few people in history to stand up to Stalin and his policies. However, the uprising was short-lived and easily quelled by the Red Army. Genden and his supporters were arrested, accused of conspiring against the state, and executed.

In 1936, Mongolia's de facto leader was Khorloogiin Choibalsan, head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Taking his orders directly from Moscow, he initiated three years of incarcerations, persecution, and torture, referred to as the Stalinist purges or the Great Purge. These purges didn't single out Mongolia; they were simply an extension of Stalin's maniacal eradication of citizens throughout the USSR. And it wasn't just enemies who were eliminated. Stalin drew up a quota system requiring each municipality within the Soviet empire to purge a predetermined number of citizens. His secret police force was under orders to round up people simply to meet the quota. None of the republics dared challenge such decrees, knowing what had happened to Ukraine a few years earlier. That state had pushed back against Moscow in 1933, an action that Stalin took as a personal insult. The enraged dictator ordered the systematic removal of all Ukrainian foodstuffs and grains from each and every household and set

up roadblocks to prevent any movement of contraband food. Mass starvation followed that winter, resulting in the death of seven million Ukrainians.

Memorial of the Stalin purges at the Victims of Political Persecution Memorial Museum in Ulaanbaatar (CC BY-SA 3.0, ED42)

In Mongolia, as in the Soviet Union, many high-ranking government bureaucrats, nobles, politicians, military leaders, aristocrats, and intellectuals were rounded up and labelled "enemies of the revolution," or traitors, or spies for collaborating with an enemy, such as the Japanese. Some were dragged into court on trumped-up charges before imprisonment or execution; others were tortured and then disappeared without a trace. Ethnic groups such as Buryats and Kazakhs were particularly singled out for punishment. But it was the Tibetan Buddhist clergy that suffered the most. Tens of thousands of lamas were executed or sent to forced-labour camps built deep in Mongolia's hinterland. All but a handful of the country's eight hundred monasteries and temples were razed to the ground. In total, 2,265 buildings belonging to the Tibetan Buddhist clergy were destroyed, and seventy-two tonnes of their metal statues, some crafted from solid silver and

gold, were shipped back to Moscow and melted down. Masses of priceless Tibetan Buddhist artifacts and antiquities, rare books, and manuscripts were pillaged.

Although these paranoid and sadistic policies came from the Kremlin, Mongolians carried them out. The Soviets exerted complete control over Mongolia's puppet government with systematized intimidation, coercion, and bribery. With it, Stalin eliminated all his opposition, imagined or not, and tore out the cultural heart and soul of the country.

Estimates vary as to the Mongolian death toll over this three-year period. Some put it at twenty-five thousand, others at forty thousand. The *New York Times*, in a 1991 article, puts the number killed at one hundred thousand.[24] Probably because of Mongolia's isolation, the rest of the world paid scant attention to the purges and the genocide of this remote archaic culture. And Stalin controlled the only record keeping officially allowed. It is telling, however, that in 1937, when the purges began, Mongolia's official census put the population at 835,000; the census ten years later reported a population of 760,000 — a decline of 75,000.

In 1996, Peljidiin Genden's daughter, Tserendulam, turned the former residence of the prime minister in Ulaanbaatar into the Victims of Political Persecution Museum. It offered practically the only public documentation and display of what transpired during the years of Soviet persecution. When I visited it in 2017, the museum was closed, boarded up, and ringed in high chain-link fencing. From the outside, it was a strange sight to see: Genden's dilapidated wooden, clapboard building, the oldest in Ulaanbaatar, surrounded and in the shadows of the city's glass-and-steel high-rise towers. It was the city's last physical reminder of a dark past that Mongolians were seemingly trying to forget.

. . .

During World War II, Mongolia came to the aid of the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front, against Germany and also against Japan, with a contribution of soldiers and materials. Following the war, at the 1945 Yalta Conference, the Soviets were able to persuade China to give up all claims to Outer Mongolia and

accept Mongolian independence, or what the USSR termed the status quo. The trade-off for the Chinese was that Inner Mongolia would now become an uncontested part of the People's Republic of China. Although the treaty was signed, the following four decades revealed that China still held on to its imperialist ambitions to "repatriate" Mongolia back into its fold.

In the 1950s, the first of a series of Five-Year Plans reintroduced state farms and collectivization in the fields of agriculture and animal husbandry. Under Soviet direction, Mongolia's industry diversified into mining, forestry, and the production of consumer goods. These developments began to increasingly connect Mongolia to the modern world, with new rail, road, and air transportation systems and an updated communications network.

Over the forty years that followed the war, Mongolia's standard of living rose dramatically. A modernized and disciplined education system practically eliminated illiteracy. An increase in the number of hospitals, doctors, and medical services dovetailed with improved health and life expectancy.

Tenelhan, like all nomadic herders, became a labourer for the state, paid in kind or in cash for animal husbandry. He told me that he was allowed to keep a total of twenty-five animals, or about 20 per cent of his herd, for personal use; the rest of his animals and animal products belonged to the state. A herder's compensation from the state would vary from year to year, depending on the herd size, its health, and the weather conditions. The nomads were organized into large co-operative groups, or *somons*, each with about three hundred families. The collectives were closely supervised, with herders given specific quotas. Failure to meet quotas could result in "reassignment," which could mean anything from an extra workload at the cooperative to exile to a hard labour camp in the Mongolian hinterland.

During the winter, large camps housed Tenelhan and his fellow herders and their animals. Supplementary animal feed was stored and made available as needed. The camps were stockpiled with coal and outfitted with portable electric generators. Each camp included a meeting hall for sports, plays, concerts, and films, as well as for group rallies and

political indoctrination. There was a veterinary clinic, small hospital, boarding school, and daycare centre. Some camps had a dairy and a wool-processing facility.

Each camp was designed to motivate the solidarity of the collective. Each member was expected to achieve or surpass quotas. The state recognized individuals, such as Tenelhan, with bonuses and awards of merit for achieving the highest levels of production.

Throughout their seventy years of control, the Soviets used the education system and the arts as propaganda tools to "re-educate" the Mongolians with the values and merits of communism. They immediately did away with the Mongolian use of Latin script, and replaced it with the Cyrillic used throughout the Soviet Union. Any Mongolian history that didn't fit the Soviet ideal was simply removed or rewritten. "Deviant influences" — including such dangerous cultural artifacts as the music of the Beatles — were banned.

In 1962, Mongolia planned to commemorate the eight hundredth anniversary of Genghis Khan's birth. But the Soviets (perhaps remembering that he laid waste to Russia) labelled the Great Khan a reactionary and an enemy of the people. The anniversary celebration was cancelled. The Mongolian Postal Service's commemorative stamp — an aged man with a long, snow-white beard who looked more like a retired bookkeeper than the ruler of the Mongol Empire — brought down fierce condemnation from the Soviet hierarchy and in *Pravda*. The stamp was never released, and the person who originated the idea was forced into exile and brutally murdered years later by unknown assailants. All references to Genghis Khan and the Mongols were removed from school textbooks. In fact, any reference to Genghis Khan anywhere in the country was erased. This suppression of history lasted until Mongolia gained independence in 1991.

It is no secret that the Soviets had (and have) a propensity for conspiratorial paranoia, needing to dominate, control, and contort everything they can for their own benefit. Even still, it was just a stamp, issued in a country whose inhabitants at the time were mostly nomadic herders of sheep with little use for such a stamp, or any stamp.

In the annals of human history, not many individuals have

the power to frighten a powerful empire seven centuries after their death. This episode harkened back to Biblical times when the Jews and the Romans placed heavy boulders, an imperial seal, and armed soldiers to guard a tomb, fearing a possible resurrection even though the man inside was dead. As it turned out, neither the Romans nor the Soviets were able prevent the subjects of their anxiety from resurfacing and once again inspiring their people.

Finally, with the emergence of *perestroika* during the 1980s, the movement towards an ideological restructuring gained momentum across all the countries inside the Soviet bloc. It culminated in 1991 with a new policy of openness, or *glasnost*, which precipitated the breakup of the Soviet Union and gave rise to the independence of the Soviet bloc countries, effectively ending the Soviet empire.

Like most Mongolians, Tenelhan was excited at the prospects of national independence and democratic governance. Mongolia immediately began a process of restoring property from state control to private ownership. Nomads such as Tenelhan were now allowed to determine the number and type of animals they had and, in theory, gained control and responsibility for their own destiny. But they were flying headlong into the topsy-turvy world of the free-market economy without a safety net. For most of the nomads and the other Mongolians, their exuberance at being liberated was short-lived.

Without Soviet subsidies, Mongolians found themselves in an economic free fall. Prior to independence, 90 per cent of Mongolian trade and investment was with the Soviet bloc. Mass unemployment hit Mongolia, and its formerly state-run industries were thrown into economic disarray. Government disorganization, runaway inflation, and a scarcity of products, including food, compounded the misery. The *tugrik*, the state currency, collapsed, dropping from a value of ten *tugriks* per dollar to eight hundred per dollar.

Remnants from decades of endemic repression, nepotism, and corruption, combined with the lingering effects of secret police powers and a state-controlled press, severely hampered the county's transition towards independence and democracy. Uncertainty continued to manifest itself during a ten-year

period of incrimination, political fallout, and violence. In 1998, two masked men viciously entered the apartment of Sanjaasurengiin Zorig, a leader of the country's democratic movement and a candidate to take the reins as prime minister, and stabbed him to death. His wife, who had been bound and gagged, claimed he had been killed because he wouldn't accept a bribe. The murder was never solved.

. . .

The Kazakh nomads I stayed with had differing views on Mongolia's seventy-year experiment with Communist rule. A few neither knew nor cared anything of politics and saw no difference between then and now. Whether their governance originated in Moscow or Ulaanbaatar, whether communist or capitalist, they felt that political forces didn't dictate the highs and lows of life on the steppes. Another nomad told me he was doubtful that there was any significant Soviet repression, saying, "It's something the West would like us to believe." Some were completely disillusioned with a free-market economy and democracy and were nostalgic for the days when the Soviets provided economic assistance. Others viewed their country's current independence as a blessing and regarded the state control of the Soviets as far too punitive and repressive. One eagle hunter told me that under the communist collective, each camel was required to produce five kilograms of wool no matter what. Any owner who failed to meet that quota could be jailed. He added, "All camels are not the same." Everyone got a wage with communism, he said, but that wasn't necessarily good. It is far better now, he added, because "everyone has to work hard for a living."

Given Stalin's brutal attempt to eradicate Mongolia's cultural past, I was surprised to hear a very clear consensus among present-day Mongolians who openly favoured neighbouring Russia over their eastern neighbour, China. On assessing Mongolia's past "account balance," they viewed the Russians as depositing more than they took, or at least as much, whereas for three centuries the Chinese only made withdrawals from the Mongolian account.

. . .

For Tenelhan, and for all the Kazakhs of Bayan-Ölgii, the breakup of the Soviet bloc presented them with a choice. Their ethnic motherland, Kazakhstan, part of the old Soviet Union, had also become a newly independent country. Its president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was offering a $900 payment and a streamlined citizenship procedure as an incentive to any expatriates living in Bayan-Ölgii who wished to return. Contrasted with the financial and political problems that had beset Mongolia, the firm rule of President Nazarbayev and his more prosperous country looked appealing. He was steering Kazakhstan towards what had the potential to become a new economic powerhouse in Central Asia.

Thousands of ethnic Kazakh immigrants, known as *oralman* or "one who came back," resettled in Kazakhstan. This included the repatriation of thousands of neighbouring Mongolian Kazakhs. Between 1991 and 1996, sixty-two thousand people, most nomadic herders from Bayan-Ölgii, folded their *gers* and emigrated.

But the Kazakhstan government soon realized that thousands of tent-dwelling herders contributed little to a country whose ambition was to become a modern industrialized state. Kazakhstan's open-door policy soon became one of quotas and qualification testing. And the new arrivals also began to question the wisdom of the move. They discovered they had entered a country where the government commonly trampled human rights. With absolute power concentrated in the office of the presidency, freedom of speech, freedom to worship, the right of peaceful protest, free elections, freedom of the press, and an independent judiciary were regularly violated or simply absent. Consequently, a reverse immigration developed during the late 1990s and into the 2000s, and a significant number of Kazakh nomads packed up and returned to Bayan-Ölgii.

DZUD

A cold wind blew on the prairie on the day the last buffalo fell. A death wind for my people.

— Sitting Bull, Chief of the Lakota Sioux

To be sure, Mongolians suffered under the Chinese and the Soviets, but for the nomadic people who lived out on the steppes of Central Asia suffering would not have been an unfamiliar state. For those who live on that land, it comes often, and often with winter. *Dzud* (or *zud*) is a Mongolian term used to describe severe winter weather with very cold temperatures and/or deep snow. Traditionally, this happens in some parts of Mongolia once every ten years or so. A *dzud* usually results in huge numbers of the nomads' livestock freezing to death or dying of starvation.

Dzuds are unpredictable and can affect any number of Mongolian provinces, with a severity that can be catastrophic. In the winter of 1944, Mongolia lost seven million animals. In the winters of 2000, 2001, and 2002, three *dzuds* in a row devastated the nomadic herders, with a combined loss of eleven million animals. In 2010, a *dzud* plunged nighttime temperatures to -50°C, with deep snow. These conditions lasted for a month and a half; by February two hundred thousand horses, cattle, and camels and two million sheep and goats had perished. The government and local and international relief agencies rushed in hay and grain for the starving animals, but as one eagle hunter told me, "It wasn't enough." By spring, the United Nations was reporting that eight million Mongolian animals, or 17 per cent of the country's animals, were dead.

In the winter of 2015-16, the year before my first visit, another *dzud* had left a million animal carcasses lying all across the frozen steppes. Again, in late October 2016, two weeks after I left Mongolia, nighttime temperatures dropped to -40°C, and that winter had four times the normal amount of snow. When it comes to winter weather, it's little wonder that Mongolians are now asking themselves, what is normal?

One thing is certain: *dzuds* are becoming more frequent. Seven have occurred in the last twenty-eight years. Mongolians have always had cold winters, being far removed from the moderating effect of ocean water, but within one generation, winters have become much colder and summers hotter, with hundreds of rivers, lakes, and springs completely drying up.

Environmentalists blame climate change. Others point out that the frequency of severe winters and animal starvation coincides with Mongolia's entry into the free-market economy.

When the regulation of herd sizes ended with the departure of the Soviets, privatization followed. Starting in 1990 pastoralists could have as many animals as they wanted. Twenty-eight years later, livestock numbers in the country had almost tripled, to sixty-six million animals. Also, with the rising price paid for pashmina, nomads are raising fewer sheep and more goats. Goats are harder on the land, often pulling grass out by the roots as they graze. Whatever the reasons, desertification and soil erosion have steadily increased across the steppes.

Dzud has not only altered life for nomadic pastoralists but has had a major effect on the entire country. With winter weather culling their animals, many people have given up nomadic life and migrated to the larger towns, particularly into an overcrowded Ulaanbaatar. These climate refugees often find themselves living in the city with few or no prospects. Their background of self-dependence and their diverse skills as nomadic pastoralists carry little weight in a city of 1.5 million people. There is no job market in Ulaanbaatar for sheep herders. The result is that most arrivals find themselves unemployed.

Between 1990 and 2017, responding to the *dzud* phenomena, 20 per cent of Mongolia's nomad population moved to Ulaanbaatar — almost four hundred thousand people. Ulaanbaatar's surrounding sprawl of nomadic migrants has grown to the point where it now represents 60 per cent of the city's population.

Nomadism provides the basics of life — food and shelter to raise a family. But even without the onslaught of *dzuds,* every nomad family has become quite aware that life on the steppes can't offer the abundance and variety of food, clothes, fabrics, and luxuries or amenities such as education, permanent dwellings, and the many specialized skills and services that come with living inside a large centre.

The increase of city-bound people is not unique to Mongolia. During the last four or five hundred years, humans have steadily and irreversibly been drawn to urban life. All over the world people are moving from the country to the city, from the rural to the urban, from a natural environment to one that is man-made. And it shows no sign of slowing down. By 2050, it is estimated, 70 per cent of the world's population will live in

large cities.

Ulaanbaatar, October, 2017

Ulaanbaatar's exploding growth has made its air quality, at least in winter, the worst in the world, five times more toxic than that of Beijing (which is lately improving) and over 130 times what the World Health Organization categorizes as safe to breathe. The problem is confined to the winter months, when fuel usage spikes from people trying to keep themselves warm. During the months of September and October 2016, when I was there, there wasn't much air pollution. But in 2017, during my last few nights in Ulaanbaatar, high winds brought very cold temperatures. On my way to the airport, a huge, dark smudge hung above Ulaanbaatar. My taxi passed the huge stacks of the city's power plants, belching out plumes of thick smoke. But coal-fired generators aren't the main problem.

When the nomads came to the city they took with them their homes — their *ger* tents and their little dung-burning stoves. But without their animals' dung, what could they burn? They needed something cheap and accessible, like soft coal, car tires, plastics, and garbage. The vast majority of winter's air pollution comes from all the little stoves that are trying to heat the 220,000 *gers* that surround Ulaanbaatar. In a dreadful irony, the major contributor to the Ulaanbaatar air pollution are these *dzud* escapees — the once self-sufficient nomads that for a hundred generations had lived sustainably in their *gers*, under the clear skies of the grassland steppes.

The situation has become serious enough to catch the attention of the World Health Organization and the environmental branch of the United Nations. During the last

several winters, people, particularly children, suffering from respiratory complications have overwhelmed the hospitals of Ulaanbaatar. The leading causes of death among children in Mongolia are directly related to the lack of breathable air. The WHO puts the death toll in Ulaanbaatar from ambient and indoor pollution at four thousand people a year.

For nomads considering migrating to the city, unemployment would have been a known risk but not air too dirty to breathe. Their basic technology, such as horses for transportation and sheep and goats for protein and fuel, isn't transferrable to urban life. They discovered that they'd traded the punishing conditions of *dzud* for another condition, no less punishing.

On the streets of Ulaanbaatar, air pollution has become a topic of civil protest, which may be a first step towards a remedy. In February 2017 people gathered in the city's central square to protest Ulaanbaatar's atrocious air quality. In front of the parliament building, and under the bronze gaze of Genghis Khan, the protesters picketed their political leaders with signs that read *Booj Ukhlee* — We Are Choking to Death.

Using exhaust filters, upgrading *ger* stove efficiency, and introducing more advanced heating systems are some of the measures that have been initiated. One of the bolder solutions proposed to deal with the pollution and overcrowding, the citizens housed in tents, the inadequate water supply, and an inefficient infrastructure (the Soviets designed the city for a third as many people) is the construction of a number of brand-new satellite eco-cities. These ambitious ideas are currently on hold, in what is called "the planning stage." The problem is so acute that the city's mayor has taken the unprecedented step of temporarily banning rural nomads from moving to the city proper. The only options for a nomad family whose animals have been ravaged by *dzuds* are to try and survive on the steppes or move to a small town.[25]

Lone Rider, 2017, mixed media, 14 x 22 inches

The solution isn't going to be easy to find; there are no quick fixes. Climate change and climate refugees, cities that are overpopulated, rural land that's overgrazed, soil degradation, misuse of energy, the absence of efficient technologies, and the financial limitations of poorer countries are issues that involve, if not implicate, the global community. But wealthy and more developed nations of the world easily overlook the plight of powerless, little-known countries. In many ways, Mongolia remains, as it has always been, a distant place out of mind.

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When I asked Tenelhan and the other eagle hunters what their thoughts were of the frequent reoccurrence of *dzud* and the subsequent abandonment of nomadic life, they all had a similar response. They acknowledged the movement of nomadic people from the land to the city, and that yes, at times they have lost significant numbers of livestock to *dzuds*. But the seven eagle hunters I stayed with had no thought of moving to Ulaanbaatar, adding that harsh winters have always been a reality for Mongolia's nomadic herders. Some, however, mentioned that they were worried about the coming winter of 2017-18, believing it would be hard on their animals. The land had received very little rain over the summer, leaving the vegetation abnormally parched. So even without a harsh winter, they worried whether the land held enough nourishment for their animals to survive until spring. (Several provinces were hit with *dzuds* in the winter of 2017-18, with the loss of over one million animals. Again, the Red Cross and

Disaster Relief Emergency Fund were called upon to try to avert another livestock disaster.)

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* I should note that ornithologists are reluctant to use the word intelligence in assessing a bird's cognition, considering it too subjective and too easily associated with the human thought process.

* Just prior to going to press, Peka emailed me saying that Janbolat had just been wed, adding that it was an especially large and joyous affair.

CHAPTER SIX

The Nomad as Warrior

As the male flew towards the wide expanse of the plains he could see that things had changed from the day before. The two field armies had drawn closer, less than half a kilometre apart. Even from a height of a thousand feet, the eagle could feel the waves of dark energy. In among the soldiers and horsemen, one army had a phalanx of fifty elephants. Hardened leather covered their heads and flanks. They were in formations of four, two in front and two behind, the foundations of massive howdahs manned with archers and crossbowmen. Above each howdah fluttered the sun and moon banners of the Great Khan's imperial court.

From the throng below rose the sound of stringed instruments, and then, in unison, thousands of soldiers — the entire legion — began a repetitive chanting. When the instruments and singing ceased, there was a brief lull that ended abruptly with the pounding of a dozen huge kettledrums. The booming cadence thundered and echoed across the steppes and into the sky. The message of the ominous rumble soon became apparent, as all hell was unleashed. The sky became veiled in a grey blur, alive with the whistling, whirring, and clattering of a hundred thousand airborne arrows. With one great cathartic roar, soldiers, horses, and elephants charged at each other. The entire mass commenced the inevitable work of battle: the crumpling and toppling of thousands, one on top of the other.

High above, the motionless speck circled and drifted, as if floating on water. Leaving the commotion below, the eagle flew off to the northeast.

Nomad Hunter, 2017, watercolour, 12 x 14 inches

While staying with the eagle hunters and their families, I often felt as William de Rubruck at his first encounter with the Mongols in 1254. “When I found myself among them,” he noted in his memoir, “it seemed to me of a truth that I had been transported into another world.”[26]

As I continued to read and think about Mongol life, it was impossible not to reflect that, apart from a few modern items, things had changed little since the days of Rubruck’s visit. The steppes and its sparse vegetation, the nomads’ *gers*, their fuel source, their weather, their food, and the animals they depended upon were exactly the same. I tried to imagine how the ancestors of the eagle hunters — independent, family bands of nomadic people who lived simple lives, caring for their animals — could have become such a disciplined, highly coordinated, and effective warring army. Pastoralism and military life were two pursuits that seemed to be incompatible, if not contradictory. Yet as I delved into the Mongol culture, I found that their brand of nomadism and their particular form of militarism were actually complementary.

For thousands of years in early history, nomadic cultures’ keen understanding of their terrain, their resources, and their climate gave them distinct advantages over sedentary peoples. During conflicts between the two, the nomadic tribes considered cities, villages, farms, and permanent settlements sitting ducks. If they fled, settlers, farmers, and villagers would

lose everything — and in any case, where would they flee? But nomadic fighters could hit and run, take what they could and melt back into the wilderness where they were at home and difficult to find.

Some of the skills honed in domestic life were critical ingredients in the Mongols' facility in the art of war. A prime example was their traditional animal hunt, called the *battue*. It was a one- to three-month undertaking conducted in the late fall and early winter. It often involved thousands of men who would surround a hunting perimeter as large as 2,500 square kilometres and then slowly move inward, tightening the noose on all of the enclosed animals. Once the animals were tightly confined the killing would start, but not before the khan and his entourage arrived. Some of the braver Mongols chose to fight the larger beasts single-handed, in the style of the Roman gladiators. The khan's private animal trainers would sometimes bring captive cheetahs, lions, and leopards to add to the killing spectacle.

At the very end of the hunt, in keeping with Mongol protocol, a few of the animals were spared the slaughter and given their freedom. (I witnessed this same prey-freeing practice with eagle hunters, during my first trip.) The *battue* produced wild game and furs for the winter but also helped hone the discipline, communication, and coordination that greatly benefited the Mongols as warriors. A common strategy they employed on the open battlefield was to outflank and encircle the enemy, as in the *battue* animal hunt, and then close in on all sides.

The Mongols, even at the height of their power, essentially remained a nomadic army. In doing so, they distinguished themselves from all other nomadic cultures that came after. As Jack Weatherford writes in *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, when the Mongols conquered and ruled most of the Eurasian landmass it marked the last time in history that a nomadic people massively triumphed over city-states and agriculturally based urban societies:

> Genghis Khan's was the last great tribal empire of world history. He was the heir of ten thousand years of war between the nomadic tribes and the civilized

> world, the ancient struggle of the hunter and herder against the farmer. . . . The clash between the nomadic and urban cultures did not end with Genghis Khan, but it would never again reach the level to which he brought it. Civilization pushed the tribal people toward the ever more distant edges of the world. Chiefs such as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse of the Lakota Sioux, and Red Eagle of the Muskogee, Tecumseh of the Shawnee, and Shaka Zulu of South Africa . . . fought the same battles across Africa and throughout the Americas, but history had moved beyond them. In the end, sedentary civilizations won the long world war; the future belonged to the civilized children of Cain, who eternally encroached upon the open lands of the tribes.[27]

THE HORSE

A Mongol without a horse is like a bird without wings.
— traditional Mongolian saying

When first observing the nomads hunting with their eagles, it is easy to overlook the role the horse plays. The Mongolians are the only falconers in the world who hunt on horseback. Perhaps nowhere in the world have a people depended on and identified with a horse more than in Mongolia. The horse was as integral to the Mongol warrior as it is to the nomad eagle hunter. The extraordinary importance of having a horse, or not having a horse, to a nomadic culture can be seen in sixteenth-century North America.

The Spanish introduction of the horse to the Plains Indians (prior to that, they had no horses) revolutionized their culture. Hunting game became easier and less time consuming. They could access and claim larger territories, putting them in conflict with other Indigenous nations. Raiding neighbouring tribes became more common, more efficient, and potentially more profitable. As fighting between Indigenous nations increased, a powerful warrior culture emerged across the Midwest, helped to a great degree by the horse.

The Mongols, of course, had a multi-century head start over the Plains Indians when it came to their relationship with the

horse. Among all early Mongol tribes, raiding parties and stealing horses from other tribes was a serious albeit common occurrence. Such raids naturally led to retribution, which gave rise to ongoing retaliations. These tit-for-tat forays were part of Mongol life and created the need for nomadic herders to also be part-time warriors.

The horse's stature in Mongol warrior society was on prominent display. They commonly carried a long ceremonial spear, the Spirit Banner (*sulde*), which was wrapped and tied with horsehair below a single or, more often, a trident blade. The hair came from the finest stallions and was meant to channel to the warrior the power inherent in the horse, the wind, the sky, and the sun. Whether in camp, in battle or on the move, the Spirit Banner always remained upright and always out in the open air. Even in death the Mongols believed the spirit of the warrior remained forever in the horsehairs of his banner.

In the thirteenth century, it is believed, there were approximately thirteen horses for every Mongol. With a nation of one million people, that equates to thirteen million horses. In 1247 the Franciscan monk Giovanni di Plano Carpini wrote, "They have so many horses and mares that we did not believe there were that many in all the world."[28] In fact, scholars estimate that, at that time, half of the world's horses were under Mongol control. Today there are fewer horses — roughly three million, or one horse per person — but their importance and their integral connection to Mongolian culture still remains. An indication of the depth of this connection is seen in the sixty-two names the Mongolian nomads use to differentiate the tonal variations in their brown-coloured horses.

In the days of the Great Khan, children learned to ride bareback by the age of four, after which they were often taught to stand and balance on a galloping horse, a skill still practised on the steppes today. When they could reach the stirrups, they would practise various games, like picking small objects off the ground while riding at full speed.

The small horses stood only twelve to fourteen hands (122 to 142 centimetres in height), and they had thick legs, a coarse coat, and a long mane and tail. They were prized for their

stamina, capable of carrying a rider six hundred miles in nine days with only a three-horse interchange. In a sprint, they could run at a full gallop for eleven kilometres without stopping. Their horses in appearance and character are similar to the Przewalski's horse, considered the last true wild horse in the world. (The last of this famous breed vanished in Mongolia in the 1960s but was reintroduced into the wild decades later through a successful zoo breeding program.) Genetic testing indicates that the modern Mongolian horse is essentially unchanged since the time of Genghis Khan and contains the largest genetic variety of any breed in the world, having evolved through natural selection and not through selective breeding.

This is the horse still widely used throughout the Himalaya. Over the nine years that I spent travelling to the central Himalaya, I got to watch these amazing animals in action. The Ladakhi nomads would commonly run their diminutive horses up steep mountain grades, at a 4.5-kilometre altitude. This effort can only be fully appreciated if you've ever experienced the heart-pounding, oxygen-sucking, and breath-stealing effort of slogging uphill in such a thin-aired elevation. The Ladakhi nomads would commonly walk their horses down a mountain incline as a measure of respect.

• • •

Humans first conscripted the horse for battle five thousand years ago. Dutiful, intelligent, loyal, and gentle, these easily manipulated herbivores have been bred and trained over time to serve in the meat-grinding carnage of battle. They have pulled supply wagons, troop carriers, siege engines, and catapults. We found them highly effective when combined with the chariot for fast-moving combat. In battle, head, leg, and body armour enhanced the horse's utility. This fast-charging horseback warfare, using both light and heavy cavalry, was so successful that it was adopted by people around the world. Only the introduction of the tank in World War I superseded the horse's value in battle. Yet even in World War II, during the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the two opposing armies used a combined 6.25 million horses, very few of which

lived to see the war's end.

Mongolian Bred, 2018, watercolour, 8 x 11 inches

Surviving over millennia through minus-forty winters and scorching hot summers, the Mongol nomads built their culture on the imperatives of sustainability and adaptability, with an emphasis on self-sufficiency. It was the environment that moulded their legendary toughness and stamina. The same applied to their horses.

During the long marches of the Mongol campaigns, just the wild grasses found on the fields, meadows, and plains of Asia and Europe sustained the horses. Even in winter, a horse would paw through the snow with its heavy hooves for shoots of grass and did not require the trouble and expense of other horse-mounted armies — hauling or obtaining large quantities of grain or hay. Each of the Great Khan's soldiers was required to bring at least five of his own mounts, although some brought far more. With extras, the soldiers always had fresh horses to ride. In addition to the soldiers' own horses, every Mongol herder was required by law to contribute some of his stock of horses to the Mongol army, as many as one out of every ten.

Saddles were positioned high, with a prominent upturn at the front and back. The stirrups were also raised. This enabled the Mongol warriors on the battlefield to let go of the reins to

free both hands for their weapons. And the saddle's design and the position of the stirrups gave the rider more stability in the throes of fighting. (The eagle hunters use the same saddle design and stirrup configuration.) Their horses were trained to turn or stop with the rider's subtle leg and hip movements. Their horses needed to respond to verbal commands even in the noise and chaos of combat. They were conditioned not to shirk or panic regardless of the danger. Mares or geldings were preferred, as they were easier to control and tended to be calmer than stallions. Mares also yielded milk that the nomads fermented and fashioned into *koumiss*, a mead-like alcoholic beverage they drank during long campaigns. In times of desperation, a Mongol soldier would even cut a minor vein on his horse's neck and drink the blood directly to sustain himself.

Mongol horses were conditioned over many centuries to colder temperatures and venturing into the warm, humid territories to the south was difficult for them. It was one of the reasons the Mongol Empire extended eastward and westward, but not southward.

The horse was not only an integral part of the Mongol's war machine, but it also played a vital role in keeping the various regions of the empire connected. One of the issues that Genghis Khan and his successors faced as their territory expanded was how to efficiently communicate with each other over many thousands of kilometres. Genghis Khan instituted *Yam* or *Ortoo*, an expansive network of routes dotted with relay stations. It was the equivalent of the American Pony Express: horseback riders transferring information across large stretches of land, one depot at a time. The riders carried official mail, military intelligence, and, later, regular mail. The stations were twenty-five to sixty-five kilometres apart, and each had fresh horses and replacement riders as well as a place to eat, rest, and sleep. China alone had 1,400 postal stations and fifty thousand horses at the ready. The riders, referred to as "arrow messengers," were held in high regard.

The extreme difficulty endured by the horses and the riders of the *Yam* has had a modern-day revival. The Mongol Derby, inaugurated in 2008, is an annual horse race open to applicants worldwide. What the Vendée Globe is to sailors, or the Marathon des Sables is to runners, or the Iditarod is to

mushers, the Mongol Derby is to riders. This thousand-kilometre horse race is by far the longest and most gruelling in the world. The twelve-day marathon is routed through the steppes of Mongolia during the height of summer. If your application is accepted, the entry fee is $13,000, which entitles you to the use of twenty-five Mongolian horses stationed along the way. Similar to the *Yam*, there are rest stops every forty kilometres to obtain fresh horses. If that doesn't sound daunting enough, the horses are classified as "semi-wild," the route is revealed only at the last moment, daytime temperatures can reach 100˚F, and wild dogs, wild horses, thunderstorms, or monstrous sandstorms are likely to chase and harass you en route. A sobering disclaimer on the Mongol Derby website notes that past participants have been permanently disfigured, seriously disabled, and even killed.

Mongolia also lays claim to another crazy variation on Genghis Khan's transcontinental mail service. Inaugurated in 2004, the Mongol Rally is a fifteen thousand-kilometre car race from England to Ulan-Ude, Siberia. (Although the route goes through Mongolia and its capital, the finish line was changed from Ulaanbaatar because of car import restrictions.) All rally participants must donate a chunk of money to charity, drive a car with a maximum engine size of 1000cc (very small), and do so without a support team. (Inevitably the cars that make it are left for the Siberians.) On my second trip I saw one of these little vehicles blasting through the steppes honking its horn, its occupants waving as they passed. Extra tires, fuel cans, and sundries were roped to its roof, with stickers plastered over the side panels. The Mongol Rally website sums up the appropriate mind set for an applicant: "If nothing goes wrong, everything has gone wrong."

. . .

Just as a gun needs bullets to be effective, the Mongols needed the right kill-complement for the horse and rider. By far their favourite weapon was the bow and arrow, the same basic weapon that they used and refined for hunting game. At first glance (and second glance) the horse and the bow and arrow don't appear to be complementary at all. The bow and arrow is

a demanding weapon even when the archer is standing on solid ground. To use it effectively astride a galloping horse, considering that the target is often in motion too, appears to be a near impossible task. To obtain the accuracy required, the Mongols learned to fire their arrows when all four hooves of their galloping charger were in the air. In battle, the Mongols became adept at firing arrows in rapid succession, to the front, side, and even to the rear.

The Mongols used two sizes of bows, one for short-range targets and one for long-range targets. To make the recurve bows, they laminated wood, bone, or horn together with sinew, fixed it with fish glue, and covered it with a layer of lacquer. The bows were much shorter than the English longbow and better suited for an archer on horseback. The larger recurve bows had a draw weight of 166 pounds (a near Herculean pull) and could reach 550 yards, or about half a kilometre. By comparison, a longbow's reach was little more than half that distance.

The bow and arrow was so integrated into Mongol culture that it was used as a measurement of distance. They would refer to something as being two bow-lengths away, or half a bow-length away.

The construction of the arrow, like the bow, was meticulous. The shafts were made of wood or reeds. Archers carried multiple quivers, each holding a specific type of arrow. They used relatively light arrows, about one centimetre thick and between eighty and a hundred centimetres in length for long-range targets. For close range, heavier bone or metal tipped arrows were used. Accuracy was also dependent on the placement and size of the fletching and the type of bird feather chosen. An arrow guided by the tail feathers of a golden eagle (although other feathers were also used) was a weapon held in high regard, both practically and symbolically. Some of the arrow tips were fashioned to produce a shrill whistle, to be set on fire, and to be tipped with poison. In battle, arrows were also used as signals to their own regiments. In the latter years of the empire, the Mongols made use of the large and very powerful stationary Chinese and Turkish crossbows.

Marco Polo tried to capture the inherited advantages that the Mongol warriors and their horses possessed and what the

rest of the world was up against:

> Their arms are bows, iron maces, and in some instances, spears; but the first of these is the weapon at which they are most expert, being accustomed, from children, to use it in their sports. They wear defensive armor made from buffalo and hides of other beasts, dried by the fire and thus rendered extremely hard and strong. They are brave in battle, almost to desperation, setting little value upon their lives, and exposing themselves without hesitation to all manner of danger. Their disposition is cruel. . . . Their horses are fed upon grass alone, and do not require barley, or other grain. The men are trained to remain on horseback during two days and nights, without dismounting, and to sleep in that position while their horses graze. No people on Earth can surpass them in fortitude under difficulties, nor show greater patience under privations of every kind. . . . It is because of these qualities, so essential to the making of a soldier, that they are fitted to subdue the world . . . [29]

. . .

Estimates of the death toll inflicted during the Mongol Empire varies greatly — not surprisingly, since historians can't even agree on the casualties inflicted during modern-day wars. Determining the actual number is made more difficult because the conquered themselves often exaggerated their losses to underline the barbarity of their foe. The Mongols also exaggerated, as embellishing the enemy's casualty numbers would help spread fear and terror to others, making surrender more likely. Historians' mid-range estimate places the total number of people killed at the hands of the Mongols, over 160 years, at around thirty-eight million, which is, by any standard, a staggering number. At the time, it represented 10 per cent of the world's population. By comparison, in four years of conflict World War I killed sixteen million people. Between 1939 and 1945 World War II killed about seventy-five million people, about 3 per cent of the world's population. However, it is

worth noting that eight hundred years ago each death took a thrust of a sword, maybe once or twice, the swing of a battle-axe, or the pull of the bowstring — or perhaps some combination of the three — and death was often dealt at close range. Modern weaponry — hand grenades, mortars, tanks, machine guns, and airplanes with their payloads of bombs and missiles —facilitates mass killing from a safer distance.

After soaking much of the Asian and European continents in blood, the Mongols introduced to the world innovations and progressive concepts that in some cases were brand-new. Ruling over one hundred million people and 22 per cent of the Earth's surface, encompassing a multitude of languages and different monetary systems, was potentially a taxation, administration, and bookkeeping nightmare. Nonetheless, by skilful use of local administrators, often the clergy, the Mongols established the abacus counting system, a simple and effective method of record keeping. They proclaimed all people should be free to practise any religion they chose. They created a civil service that was based on merit instead of inherited privilege. They were the first to use a passport that guaranteed protection and free passage through the empire, a newly initiated concept for state ambassadors. They used paper money, developed a more accurate calendar, and, with their growing bureaucracy, adopted the technology of movable type from the Chinese, giving them the ability to mass-print information and distribute it across their empire. Perhaps their most important accomplishment was a continent-wide trade belt, the famous Silk Road, which moved goods freely from the Pacific Ocean to Europe.

The first half of the fourteenth century (the later part of the Mongol Empire) has been described as the *Pax Mongolica*. Like the *Pax Romana,* this historiographical term describes a new social order with unified communication, trade, movement of people, and relative peace, across vast and diverse lands.

So, after a few generations of terrifying and plundering two continents, the Mongols put aside their weapons and transformed themselves into relatively reasoned and responsible administrators. It's as if a gang of ruthless desperados that had been holding up banks right across the country and burning them to the ground when they left,

decided instead to actually run the banks, putting their own people in charge as managers. And it turned out they were pretty good at it, too.

. . .

After Genghis Khan's death, some of the Mongol khans, having seen the splendour of other cities, decided to build a permanent capital from the ground up, at Karakorum, 350 kilometres west of present day Ulaanbaatar. The construction was a ten-year endeavour overseen by Genghis's son Ögedei. Although not as grand as many of Eurasian cities, it was their jewel, their sanctuary, and a source of great pride. The finest craftsmen, engineers, and artisans were brought from across the realm for its design and construction. It was a walled city, surrounded by a moat, with an elaborate piped system of fresh water. At its main entrance were a number of grand halls leading to numerous palaces. Confirming the commitment to freedom of religion, the city contained twelve Buddhist temples, two mosques, and a Christian church. Karakorum was also the realm's centre of production, and hundreds of tradespeople created all manner of things. The Mongols established a foundry for smelting gold, bronze, silver, copper, and iron. They also produced glass beads, bone and wood carvings, furniture, pottery, and yarn, as well as weapons and armour.

Sculpted silver tree built by Genghis Khan's son Ögedei. Drawing by Mathieu-Richard-Auguste Henrion, 1846, adapted from William de Rubruck, *The Journal of William de Rubruck: Account of the Mongols.*

The city's main attraction was an enormous sculpted tree made out of silver. The tree branches were entwined with snakes, and on the ground around it were four seated lions made of silver. At the top of the tree was a carved angel blowing a trumpet. Out of the tree's four limbs poured four different beverages. The Khan, his court, and his guests always had a choice of wine, *koumiss* (fermented mare's milk), rice mead, or honey mead.

The Franciscan monk William de Rubruck and his envoy travelled from Europe on horseback nine thousand kilometres to visit Karakorum in the early winter of 1254. The monk and his companions had a front row seat at the knee of Möngke Khan (grandson son of Genghis, and brother to Kublai). Inside the court, Rubruck describes in detail the silver beverage tree and the complexity of its operation. He goes on to write of his first meeting with Möngke Khan:

> He was seated on a couch, and was dressed in a skin spotted and glossy, like a seal's skin. He is a little man, of medium height, aged about forty-five years, and a young wife sat beside him. . . . He had us asked what we wanted to drink, wine, rice wine, clarified mare's milk or honey mead. For in winter they make use of these four kinds of drinks. I replied, "My lord, we are not men who seek to satisfy our fancies about drinks; whatever pleases you will suit us." So, he had us given of the rice drink, which was clear and flavoured like white wine, and which I tasted a little out of respect for him, but for our misfortune our interpreter was standing by the butlers, who gave him so much to drink, that he was drunk in a short time. After this the Chan [Khan] had brought [to him] some falcons and other birds of prey, which he took on his hand and looked at, and after a long while he bade us to speak. Then we had to bend our knees.[30]

Historical assessments of the Mongols and their empire, as

with most empires, are mixed. Seen in their totality, the Mongols encompassed both extremes: the yin and the yang, the duality of new-age thinking and the brutality of primal force. This duality is announced at the very beginning of *The Secret History of the Mongols*. It tells of the creation myth regarding the birth of the Mongol people: the mating of a fallow deer with a blue-grey wolf. The mythology symbolizes the combined strength found in the union of the feminine and the masculine, of compassion and aggression, of saviours and demons, of nurturing and plundering, of good and evil.

I saw glimpses of that duality during my time with the eagle hunters. An example was how they treated their eagles — some were loved like family members while others were seen as nothing but chattel, tied to a mountaintop.

END OF EMPIRE

While we may learn from the past, we don't seem to learn much.
— Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*

Over a period of two years I researched, read, and thought a good deal about the Mongols and their empire. One of the questions that all the books and related material attempted to answer was: why did the Mongol Empire fail?

As when an airliner unexpectedly goes down, this is a natural question to ask. But if every airliner that takes off crashes, perhaps there is a more pertinent question to ask. Why build a plane at all if they all crash? And why build empires, if they all enviably fail?

The Mongols were just one in a very long line of cultures that have exercised extreme imperialist ambitions. The Persian Achaemenid Empire ruled 112 million people 2,500 years ago. So extensive was their domain that it encompassed an astounding 45 per cent of the world's population. Over the centuries, a myriad of different ethnicities, religions, and city-states have had their shot at empire building: the Russian Empire under Peter the Great controlled twenty-three million square kilometres; Spain controlled colonies that were spread out over five continents; the Portuguese Empire was founded in 1495 and lasted five hundred years. The Islam-inspired Umayyad Caliphate at one time ruled sixty-two million people.

The Roman, Ottoman, Egyptian, and Aztec Empires — and hundreds more — all rose, all ruled, and all fell.

Like the Mongol Empire, the British Empire was multi-continental and particularly huge. Unlike the Mongol territory, though, it spread across multiple oceans. Instead of horses, ships connected its holdings. Great Britain ruled 533 million people in thirty countries and territories, proudly describing the accomplishment as "the empire on which the sun never sets."

As mentioned, my grandparents were ethnic Ukrainians growing up under the rule of the pre–World War I Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the time, it was one of the world's great powers, the second largest after the Russian Empire, controlling fifty million people, including Italians, Romanians, Croats, Serbs, Slovenes, Ukrainians, Poles, Slovaks, Czechs, Austrians, Hungarians, and Germans. The Austro-Hungarian rulers had the task of representing, or at least managing, all these different cultures, each with its own customs and religious variations, each aspiring to hold on to its own cultural identity. This empire, centred in both Vienna and Budapest, was somehow supposed to unite this contrived conglomerate, dampen expressions of ethnic nationalism, allay economic disparities and discontent, and effectively communicate with its subjects in more than a dozen languages.

Seen from the Western perspective's preference for democratic rule and personal liberty, it's hard to believe that the concept of empire endured as a go-to governing institution for tens of thousands of years.

If an empire's collapse is evitable, the reasons for it vary. Often it comes after a defeat in war. Sometimes it results from being overextended, overly complacent, or because the death of a powerful ruler is followed by his successors' ineptitude. Other times an empire fails because it is unable to control its population and civil war erupts. On occasion an "act of God," such as a dramatic shift in climate, a pandemic, or some other natural disaster initiates the downfall.

Almost all of these factors diminished and eventually ended the rule of the Mongol Khans. After the death of Genghis Khan, squabbling and warring between his heirs necessitated the division of their territory into fiefdoms. But their differences

were more than territorial. In China and Persia, the khans and their courts abandoned many of their Mongol traditions in favour of the culture of the regions they ruled, incorporating local customs, dress, and even religion. This was an affront to other Mongol khans, a departure from their nomadic steppe heritage — a cultural betrayal that exacerbated pre-existing rifts and jealousies.

Perhaps the biggest impact on the Mongols' decline, as well as that of many other civilizations of the time, was the bubonic plague. It was called the Black Death because the internal hemorrhaging of the body's blood vessels left the skin blackened. It came from a bacterium carried by fleas and very efficiently spread by rats, and it had no known cure. It is believed the plague originated in China in 1330; by the mid-1300s, China had lost one half to two-thirds of its population. It swept westward across Asia and into Europe and Africa, facilitated, ironically, by the Silk Road that the Mongols had helped establish. For Europeans, the Black Death culled one-third of their numbers. Two hundred years later, the plague crossed the Atlantic Ocean and wreaked havoc throughout the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Warriors (detail), 2017, mixed media, etching and chine collé, 26 x 21.5 inches

One thing did differentiate the Mongols from almost all other empires, apart from its vast size. Great civilizations are almost always known and remembered by the splendour of the architecture they left behind: the cruciform piers and supporting vaults of the Romans, the Gothic buttresses and

clustered columns of the Europeans, the Byzantine marbled roofs and coffered ceilings of the Persians, and the cupolas and colourful onion domes of the Russians. The Mongols' architectural contribution to the world was a felt tent.

THE EAGLE BRAND

Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.
— Samuel Johnson

Interactions between modern-day nations are arguably neither more stable nor less violent than in the time of empires. With the growth of the modern nation-state after World War I, civil wars and wars between nations have claimed about 160 million lives, half of those during World War II.

Regardless of the nation, empire, kingdom, tribe, or confederacy, there is a near certainty that at some point it will be engaged in armed conflict, either internally or with an external foe. This necessitates soldiers trained and willing to fight. Modern nations, with or without conscription, have skilfully used patriotism, sense of duty, the need to belong, or feelings of self-worth to promote enlistment. Anthems, flags, emblems, and other symbols help to align a citizenry with a unified identity and a sense of national pride. And the same manipulative tools rally the support and the efforts of non-combatant citizens.

The patriotic symbol used most often over the centuries — whether it be by a nation, a state, an empire, a tribe, or a republic — is the golden eagle. In a spiritual, militaristic, or mythological context, our close association with the eagle has been practically habitual, as if this particular bird is the mirror that humans use to see their own desired reflection.

Emblematically, the eagle has been used since people first hand-painted its likeness on cave walls and chiselled them on stone tablets. In Greek mythology, Apollo transformed King Periphas into a giant golden eagle that became Zeus's personal messenger. The Bible tells of golden eagles dwelling on the brown granite cliffs of the Sinai, where Moses received the covenant. The Israelites are said to have escaped Egyptian bondage on the wings of an eagle. Similarly, for the Germanic and Viking tribes the eagle is closely connected to Odin, the

foremost Norse god. The Buryat, one of the pre-empire Mongol tribes, considered the golden eagle the life force of the world, the source of all living things.

Study for Lord of the Steppes, 2018, mixed media, 14 x 21 inches

For the Romans, the bronze eagle atop a Roman legion's metal staff was sacred, regarded as the very heart and soul of Rome. In battle, above all else, the eagle standard could not fall or end up in the hands of the enemy.

Most Indigenous North American tribes hold the eagle in paramount esteem. Many regarded it as a medicine bird that holds special powers. The Iroquois, the Assiniboia, and the Hiawatha use an eagle mask to conjure up the bird's spirit in their ceremonies. The Lakota Sioux, the Blackfoot, the Cheyenne, and many other Plains peoples adorn their headdresses and war bonnets with golden eagle feathers. Warriors across the Plains and into the Northeast marked each vanquished enemy or act of bravery with an eagle feather attached to their personal ceremonial staff, or coup pole. Many West Coast First Nations depict eagles at the top of their totem poles. The golden eagle or war eagle in particular is associated with courage in battle, its feathers given to warriors to reward their bravery (the custom is still practised today with some returning Indigenous veterans). Indigenous tribes in Brazil, Australia, and Burma see the eagle as an important symbol and ally, if not a deity. Many of their legends describe the eagle as the messenger between humans and the Creator.

Archaeological discoveries in Mexico and Latin America show the Mayan and Aztec cultures likewise idolizing the golden eagle.

With few exceptions, such as the bald eagle in America, the representations are of the golden eagle. It was the predominant emblem of ancient Egypt, the Persian Empire, and the French Empire under Napoleon. It is a symbol of Arab nationalism in Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. In heraldry, it is a symbol of strength and courage used by nations throughout the world, including Albania, Austria, Colombia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kurdistan, Mexico, Montenegro, Nigeria, Panama, the Philippines, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine. The national flag of Kazakhstan depicts a soaring golden eagle.

The connection with war and power continues in more modern times: Franco used the eagle as a symbol for his rule in twentieth-century Spain; the eagle is still the symbol of the Royal Air Force in Britain; and, after it was abolished for many years because of its association with tsarists, the two-headed eagle now once again represents Russia. Next to the swastika, the eagle was the most important emblem of Nazi Germany, and Mussolini's Italy enlisted the eagle as well. The eagle is depicted on the back of America's most used coin, and many branches of the United States government enlist it for service: the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Air Force; the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, and Defense; the US Postal Service; and of course it is represented on the presidential flag and seal.

Its likeness is found extensively throughout the sporting world, too. In contests where the common goal is vanquishing the opponent, what could be better than associating your team with a predator so dominant and powerful that it fears nothing? A quick Google search indicates that the United States currently has seventy-six university and college football teams that are named the Eagles.

Why this obsessive and enduring need for people to project an association with this particular bird? The eagle is actually a paradoxical choice as a symbol. Unlike humans, the golden eagle is the antithesis of a social species. Apart from mating and raising young, they have little interest in associating with

others. As parents, they look out for themselves and their young, nothing more. And unlike humans, eagles cannot be classified as industrious or even hard working. Apart from mating, killing, and feeding, they are prone to sit around and roost 80 to 90 per cent of the time. Surely there are more appropriate or valid symbols for nations to hitch their identity to than an antisocial avian assassin who snoozes all day.

So what symbol would better exemplify a nation — its size, its growth, its ambition, its social cohesiveness, the combined strength of its citizenry? The lion? Perhaps too much like the eagle. The beaver? Only if we run out of fuel for our chainsaws. A leaf from a deciduous tree? Yeah, right.

What about a member of the Formicidae family?

Granted, on the surface the ant isn't exactly a sexy choice, but delving deeper, it actually relates to and embodies a host of innate human traits, better than almost anything else. In fact, some early myrmecologists studied ants and their "empires of dirt" for solutions to human problems — the parallels are certainly there:

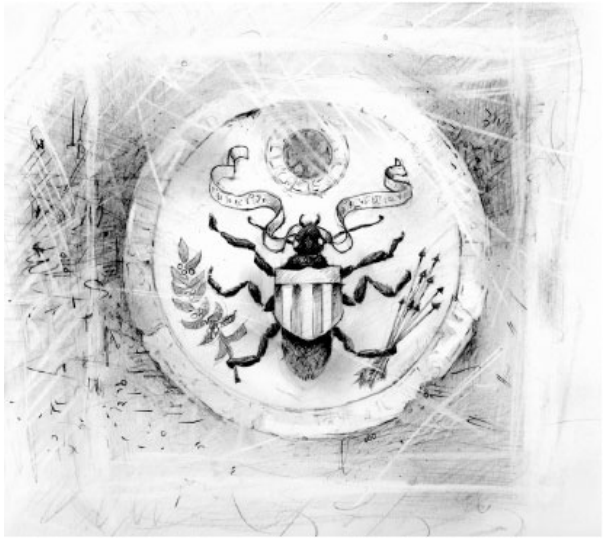
- Ants are social, dominant, and a highly successful and adaptive invasive species.
- Ants are innate workers and engineers.
- Ants are great problem-solvers and have the ability to learn from other ants.
- Ants are hierarchical, with an acknowledged leader (queen) and a clear chain of command below her.
- Ant societies, like ours, use specialists in domestic and military endeavours, such as light- and heavy-infantry soldiers, foragers, nursemaids, builders, gardeners, sanitary workers, and morticians.

Like us with cell phones, ants habitually communicate with each other by way of pheromone chemical transfer, through sound, smell, and touch. Ants build mega-colonies, similar to our cities, that can contain a million ants or more. They build, maintain, and navigate road systems up to a two-hundred-metre distance from their nest. And, like human empires, ant

colonies are programmed to grow exponentially. Scaling back doesn't seem to be in their DNA.

Admittedly, ants fit the communist ideal a lot better than the capitalist system. As E.O. Wilson, the well-known myrmecologist and specialist in the field of sociobiology, has observed, "Marx had the right system but the wrong species."[31] And lastly, ants are highly territorial and warlike, even more than humans. (Wilson muses that if ants had nuclear weapons, the world would be obliterated within a week.)

A basic principle of species interaction, as we know, is the territorial imperative. According to this theory, almost all species exhibit an instinct to acquire territory and defend it against outsiders. But in 2002 researchers made a discovery so surprising that it practically upended that long-held belief. Along the Mediterranean coast, scientists found a super-colony — with one million queens and over three hundred million workers — of Argentine ants with interconnecting nests and passages that stretched out across six thousand kilometres. Then, in 2010, another super-colony of Argentine ants turned up in California. This one was nine hundred kilometres in length with an estimated one trillion ants. Later, huge colonies of the same species were discovered in South America, New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii, and Japan. What was particularly astonishing to myrmecologists and evolutionary behaviourists was not just the size of these super-colonies, but their unusual behaviour.



Emblem Alternative, 2018, pencil on paper, 9 x 9 inches

As mentioned, normally one ant colony will fight another ant colony over territory, even if they are the same species of ant, but these super-colonies were meeting and joining together *compatibly* with other Argentine colonies. Even when Argentine ants were taken across the ocean and placed in another, unfamiliar Argentine ant colony, they did not see each other as alien or an enemy. They met, interacted, and worked together, becoming part of the same grand empire — queens, workers, soldiers, foragers all co-operating. This seeming ability of an entire species to evolve to live in harmonious co-operation I found noteworthy in light of the human failure to do so.

. . .

Neither our nation-states nor our umbrella forums like the United Nations appear capable of dealing with the prevention of war or the growing array of problems that confront and threaten the human race. Finding agreement on a climate change accord among all two hundred countries — or even unanimous agreement that the problem exists — has stymied meaningful action. International terrorism and cyber-threats, the continental migration of millions of people, ocean pollution, depletion of marine life, the extinction of land

species, economic instability and disparity, and the threat of new pandemics are just a few of the larger issues that the contemporary world seems incapable of solving.

If dividing the population of the world into two hundred nation-states isn't working, then what? Does the world need a new model of governance? Perhaps a version of *Pax Mongolica*, some sort of global entity that can garner respect and speak with a uniting voice? An over-arching governing structure with the capacity to identify and implement solutions to global issues?

Some suggest that such an entity already exists, namely the United States of America. And it's true, its culture has penetrated every corner of the planet. At every outpost I've travelled to — from Greenland, to Patagonia, to Ladakh, to the Amazon, to Antarctica, to Mongolia, to Rajasthan, and to the little fishing villages along the Ghanaian coast — I've found the US dollar and the English language. And America was founded on some lofty principles: liberty, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness, separation of church and state, respect for individual rights, and a free press.

Yet below the surface are plenty of reasons for caution. It is more than coincidence that America's chosen symbol is the eagle, an apex predator. Since its founding, the United States has been at war for 222 out of its 243 years of existence. That equates to fighting against one out of every six countries in the world. And even when they *are* shooting others, they're regularly shooting each other. It doesn't inspire thoughts of global unity when the American president tweets, "I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works." This sounds too much like the Genghis Khan approach. Perhaps *Pax Americana* isn't the answer.

It prompts the question: which needs altering— our form of governance or our character as humans? Is there a way to share our precious world with each other peacefully? Maybe the worldwide web and the digital age is a first step towards a new world order — an enveloping membrane linking and facilitating an interconnected organism, circumventing the hubris of nations and their rulers. Maybe artificial intelligence is another step that will help make this possible. We already

rely on it: for the global positioning system, for weather tracking, for our smart phones, search engines, to regulate our hearts, to fly our planes, and it will soon have the keys to our cars. We have gradually accepted the assistance of artificial intelligence in pursuit of our physical well-being; maybe it can help us modify our deviant emotions and curb our reactionary nature towards violence.

So maybe the solution to our planetary predicament has already started, part of an evolutionary process that, like the Argentine ant, will dial back aggression and war-like tendencies and enhance our co-operative abilities. With it will surely come a loss of much of the individuality we cherish, but maybe that's a price we need to pay to continue to live on our crowded and compromised planet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eagle Festival, 2017

At 3,000 feet, she was riding an updraft off arid plains below. It was a windless morning as she coasted lazily southwest. For nine years, she had successfully nested in the interior of the Apache Mountains of West Texas. She and her mate defend almost two hundred square kilometres, from the Pecos River west, all the way past the Sierra Diablo Mountains.

In the far distance, she saw the shimmering thread of the Rio Grande cutting through the bleached savannah tones of pink and ochre rocks.

She wasn't caught unaware. She had seen it approach. Without panic, she descended a few hundred feet. The object of her attention did the same.

It was a yellow Piper Cub, America's flying equivalent of the Model T. It was a slow and noisy plane, but its trouble-free reliability had made it a favourite among bush pilots.

The plane approached within two hundred feet of the eagle. As the large bird was about to descend again, a shotgun blast from the open side door sent pellets ripping through the eagle's body. A half dozen feathers were blown loose as the eagle instinctively tucked in her broad wings and dove downward. But within a few seconds her wings and body lost control, and she began to tumble to the ground.

Kenjebek had been an eagle hunter for fifteen years. I was in his family's kitchen the night before the 2017 Eagle Festival was to start, watching as he fed his six-year-old female eagle. He had prepared her dinner by carefully washing out the blood from a sheep's lungs, which he'd then cut into palm-sized pieces, filling a medium-sized bowl. When the eagle's hood was removed, she frantically, as if starved, grabbed a piece of lung and threw her head back, swallowing the meat in one gulp. Again, the same eagerness with the next piece. Then hesitation. The eagle looked at the bowl of meat that Kenjebek coaxed towards her beak, like a parent trying to get an infant to eat another spoon of vegetables. The eagle started to bock, jabbing and pecking at Kenjebek's glove, telling the chef that his entrée

sucked. The chef wasn't offended. This, more or less, was what Kenjebek intended. The fine-tuning of the eagle's disposition through her stomach — finding the perfect balance between fullness and hunger — was his goal. The objective was to make sure the bird wasn't feeling satisfied and thus complacent while at the same time making sure she was not so hungry that her behaviour would be unpredictable or uncontrollable.

THE GILDED CAGE

> *Every bird of prey looks over its shoulder before it goes in for the kill, even a hawk. Even they know to watch their backs — every single one but an eagle. It's fearless.*
>
> — Michelle Horst, *Wake Me Up*

When hunting with an eagle, there is always a fair degree of uncertainty. Once the hunter has let go of the bird, what happens next is, to some degree, a roll of the dice, no matter how the eagle was fed the night before. This degree of unpredictability reminded me of a pitcher throwing a baseball, or at least one very specific pitch.

The seams on a baseball are what enable a pitcher to make a ball curve or drop. This manipulation is used to fool the batter and make his swing miss the ball. The exact movement of the ball depends on the thrower's grip and how the ball's seams are spun as they come out of the hand. However, one pitch, called a knuckleball, isn't spun to the plate but is "pushed." The ball doesn't cut through the air in a spinning motion; instead it floats, with almost no spin. The result, if the ball is thrown right, is that the air pushes against the ball, buffeting it, on the way to the plate. The pitch is thrown slowly so it doesn't look intimidating, but, if thrown right, it is almost impossible to hit, because nobody knows exactly where the buffeting is going to take it, including the pitcher. It can be a highly effective pitch but is so unpredictable that less than one in a hundred professional pitchers dare throw it.

Like a knuckleball, the eagle, once released by the hunter, might go anywhere. When hunters called their eagles down from a mountain ridge in the eagle-calling competition at the 2016 and 2017 festivals, some swooped off the cliff and within ten seconds were sitting on the hunters' outstretched arms.

Others climbed high and surveyed their options before dropping out of the sky, enticed by the hunk of meat in the hunter's hand. Some ascended into the clouds and then decided to drift back into the mountain interior. And a few went rogue, circling and hovering before plummeting, to the crowd's horror, like a kamikaze fighter pilot, talons spread, onto an innocent spectator or another eagle.

Even after spending considerable time observing the eagle-hunter relationship, I remained perplexed as to why every eagle doesn't say, at its first opportunity, "I'm out of here," and take off into the mountains, free from its human captors. At first, I figured that the eagle, like a wild horse, once "broken" was no longer susceptible to the urge to return to life in the wild. But that comparison doesn't really fit. In the wild, herds of horses have a highly complex social structure. Hierarchies are established and maintained through aggression, submission, dominance, and leadership. When a wild horse is captured for domestication, the horse is naturally frightened, triggering a fight-or-flight response. Basically, the horse fears it might be hurt, killed, or eaten. Once it realizes this is not the case, the horse soon seeks to replicate the social structure it is familiar with, identify the leader, and bond with that individual.

This isn't the natural thought process of a golden eagle. The eagle is not part of a defined social structure. It is an independent and antisocial entity. The human-eagle liaison is based on a shared goal — the desire to hunt and kill — and sustained by rewards of food. A degree of bonding, however, develops between the hunter and the eagle that is hard to quantify or express. *Friendship*, *respect*, and *fondness* are some of the words the hunters apply to their relationships with their eagles, and they claim that the eagle, to some degree at least, feels similarly towards them.

I could certainly understand that bond. The eagle, like any animal, would become accustomed to a highly predictable life, where food and shelter are guaranteed. This applies as well to people. When, for example, the Soviet Union disintegrated, many of its satellite states, such as Mongolia, were ecstatic to obtain freedom, independence, and a free-market economy — at least at first. The early years of transition from one system to the other were, however, brutally difficult. Those standardized

prices on basic foods and consumer goods, those government co-operatives, that living wage for everyone, and the government subsides on basic products were gone, replaced with the cut and thrust of the capitalist marketplace.

Festival photographers

People who were used to communism, and eagles living under the care of hunters — that sounded like a reasonable analogy to me, but perhaps only to a degree. When eagle hunters finally release their birds back to the wild, I was told, after around six years of captivity, it's done in the spring, when lots of gerbils, voles, marmots, and other wild food are available. The hunter does this so the eagle can survive, mate, and reproduce, thereby sustaining a healthy population. When I asked my eagle-hunter friends about releasing their birds, I expected to hear more than a few stories of the eagle's reluctance to leave the umbrella of communism for the survival-of-the-fittest world of free enterprise. But the hunters told me that eagles, once released, never return.

THE EAGLE HUNTRESS

What the young eagle sees in the nest, it repeats when it grows.
— Kazakh saying

The inaugural Ölgii Eagle Festival, in 2001, was a small, word-of-mouth affair, attended by a dozen or so eagle hunters and a

hundred onlookers. By 2017 it was a very different story. Over a hundred golden eagles and their owners arrived for the competition, and more than a thousand onlookers. And surrounding the event ring dozens of vendors were selling a wide assortment of food and traditional Kazakh and Mongolian crafts. The 2017 festival, compared to ’16, had an influx of international film crews and image-capturing drones — and a lot more people toting enough high-end camera equipment to rival a photographic trade show.

There was no end to the incredible subject matter available: eagle hunters of all ages in traditional fox- and wolf-fur garb, atop their decked-out mounts, golden eagles on their arms. The hunters were unbelievably accommodating and consistently agreed to every photographer’s eagle-posing request: hunter with eagle; tourist with hunter; tourist holding eagle; tourist holding eagle on horseback; tourist with hunter, eagle, and horse; and so on. The only problem was trying to dodge all the heads and bodies of the other photographers to get an unobstructed shot.

The extent of the eagle hunter’s cooperative interaction with the throngs of tourist photographers is hard to overstate. Dozens of cameras pointed at you for two days and responding to endless pose requests would seemingly make anyone grumpy. Yet from what I saw, these ruggedly independent eagle hunters remained cheerful and totally obliging. It was hard to understand. Were they simply pleased that others were so interested in their culture, so interested that they’d travelled from all over the world to the outer reaches of Mongolia to witness the festival? Was it because this photo posing was still new to them? Had the Eagle Hunters’ Association briefed them to cooperate with the tourists, or were they just a group of particularly friendly people?

Their attitude contrasted with what I’d witnessed in other isolated places and cultures. A herder in Morocco refused to allow me to take any photographs of his goats. A fisherman in Ghana wanted payment before I could sketch his old beached fishing boat. Those are just two examples. Most people within a traditional culture regard camera-clicking tourists as an annoyance, to the point where photographing is, in some cases, a contentious issue.

I asked every hunter I stayed with about his attitude towards the yearly expansion of the festival and the ongoing increase in tourist attendance. I consistently heard that they considered this a good thing, a reaffirmation of their eagle-hunting culture. They said this with no equivocation. It's a commendable point of view. Yet the idea that the antidote for a threatened traditional culture is to bring in more appreciative tourists is, in my experience, flawed. It might look appealing in the beginning, but over the long term, it's likely to be culturally detrimental.

As mentioned, attendance increased between the 2016 and 2017 festivals, with 30 per cent more tourists and significantly more hunters, eagles, and vendors. This was attributed to the recently released film *The Eagle Huntress*. The subject of this full-length documentary is Aisholpan, the thirteen-year-old daughter of a nomadic family in Bayan-Ölgii, and her desire to become an eagle hunter. In the film, Aisholpan's perseverance is on full display as, with her father's guidance and encouragement, she is seen obtaining, training, and hunting with her own golden eagle. The film is set mostly in winter, depicting a stunningly beautiful landscape, a rich Kazakh culture, and her family's harsh day-to-day life. It ends with Aisholpan entering and winning a major award at the 2015 Eagle Festival and later hunting successfully with her eagle in the wild.

The film premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival to rave reviews and went on to capture numerous honours at other film festivals. *The Eagle Huntress* connected positively with audiences and most critics and was picked up and released by Sony Pictures worldwide. For the first time, hundreds of thousands of people were made aware of Kazakh eagle hunting and the festival at Ölgii. Aisholpan competed at both festivals I attended and was accorded rock-star status, besieged by camera-clickers and festival sponsors. At times I felt sorry for the young girl, although she mostly seemed to enjoy the attention.

Apprenticeship of a Huntress, 2018, oil on canvas and mixed media, 30 x 25 inches

One aspect of the film deals with the premise that hunting with eagles in Kazakh culture is considered the domain of men, with the male eagle-hunting elders frowning upon Aisholpan's efforts. The promotional material for the film leaned heavily on this female-empowerment theme, knowing it to be an effective hook for Western audiences. Aisholpan, early publicity stated, "had to overcome an ingrained culture of misogyny to become the first female eagle hunter in 2,000 years of male-dominated history." But this claim landed the film and the filmmaker in some controversy.

Historian Adrienne Mayor, from Stanford University, was one of the first to question the claim, citing archaeological discoveries that reveal "that steppe nomad females engaged in riding and hunting activities and about one third of the women were active warriors in battle."[32] Both women and men "shared the vigorous outdoors and everyone rode fast horses, shot

arrows with deadly accuracy, hunted game and defended the tribe," Mayor wrote. "This ancient way of life — embracing gender equality — was essential for tribes migrating across oceans of grass." Mayor supported her argument with many examples of eagle huntresses in the mythology, poems, songs, and ancient depictions in Central Asian cultures. For more modern examples, she noted Mongolian and Kazakh eagle huntresses such as Princess Nirgidma, a young woman who became an eagle-hunting celebrity in Europe in the 1920s, and pointed to the resurgence of interest in eagle hunting among females that came about following the end of the Soviet era in the early 1990s. In the two festivals that I attended, a number of other young girls, perhaps motivated by Aisholpan, participated with the men in the eagle competitions. These other young women didn't win the major awards, but they performed as well as many of the men who competed.

During my two trips to Bayan-Ölgii I got to ask roughly a dozen hunters how they felt about women who wanted to hunt. Although all the hunters had heard about Aisholpan's film, only one had actually seen (and liked) *The Eagle Huntress*. In my limited survey, I found opinions were split between those who thought women should be able to do what they wanted and those who believed eagle hunting is a male domain. One hunter told me that, in times past, a girl would commonly learn to hunt with an eagle, particularly if there were no sons in the family. However, another hunter said that, unlike the men, who hunt two or three times a week through the winter as a way of life, today's young female eagle hunters do it mainly for show, to enter and compete in the Eagle Festival. I heard this often from the older hunters about young males, too. They referred to these young people as "festival hunters."

During my stays with the eagle hunting families I wondered how wives viewed their husbands taking off to go eagle hunting for days at a time, presumably leaving behind the many chores and family duties. I wondered if it was our society's equivalent of the husband and his buddies taking off to go golfing, or fishing, or playing poker? Through my translator, I asked one of the wives how she regarded her husband's time spent eagle hunting. As we sat around the kitchen table I watched my interrupter struggle with the

interpretation of my question. Upon the translation, an immediate and awkward silence fell over the kitchen. I thought the question was innocent enough, but like the left side/right side of the tent, or a host of other protocols of the steppe nomads, I had crossed an invisible cultural line. As the wife hesitated to answer, the husband interceded with a predictable and deflective response.

THE CAMERA LENS

> *Nothing is so common-place as to wish to be remarkable.*
> — Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., *The Autocrat of the Breaksfast Table*

One of things I most envied about the eagle hunters' lives was their home environment — a breath-taking, 360-degree surround of mountains, glaciers, and rolling steppe-lands. The light and the features of the Bayan-Ölgii landscape have a distinctiveness that conveys both an ethereal and a disquieting emotion. In the foreground are the stunted grasses, spotted here and there with patches of sand and gravelly rocky rubble. In the fall the two elements are, for the most part, indistinguishable, joined together with minute variations inside the faded tones of dirty wool. The middle ground, as with most landscapes, is usually the focal point: mountains, ancient and worn by Himalayan standards yet still magnificently dramatic. Dolloped and defined by gleaming glaciers and virgin snow fields, they offer a high contrast to the foreground's textured warm and muted hues. The ranges are sensually sculpted with rounded ridges and plunging crevasses, pristine and wild, near but beyond reach — little wonder the Kazakhs believe this is where their gods reside. Above the mountains, the sky is often cloudless, but its colour's intensity is diminished. The sun seems too bright, too strong, with no filters and too much reflected light off the land to allow its sapphire brilliance to be seen fully or captured digitally. When cloud cover arrives, the land's personality changes with a foreboding that penetrates the soul.

My camera was important for my work in Mongolia, as it is on all my trips. But the many landscape photographs I took captured only a part of what I experienced. My images don't

convey the land's emotional lonesomeness, or the sound of the dried grasses swaying, or the raven's call, or the bone-chill of below-zero temperatures, or the biting howl of a northern wind. And when I tried to capture the rage, fury, and cyclone force of a sandstorm, my digital portrayals showed it as comparatively feeble and toothless. Nor could I photograph the authority imprinted in the memory of the land. The click of the camera doesn't show the restless lion that sleeps. It doesn't show its teeth and claws, or the fury that comes at its awakening when its roar unsettles man and beast.

Still, for me the camera remains a magical box with the conjuring power to reach out, grab what it sees, and, with the click of a button, stuff it back inside. Of course, that way of thinking is of another era. Today, the ubiquitous smart phone and the blizzard of instantly shared images that have followed have devalued the currency of what was the still camera's magic.

The motion picture camera, however, is another story. In skilled hands, it still retains its power to impress. When focused on certain people it can motivate them to do just about anything. It carries the promise to instantly elevate: to make the unknown known, to make a nobody a somebody, and to make the ordinary extraordinary.

Of course, filmmaking is a world of illusions. Even documentaries are scripted, directed, and edited. Without a predetermined storyline and script, it would be nearly impossible to secure the financial backers needed to get a film off the ground. Even "true-life stories" almost always follow a well-established formula: set the scene, introduce the characters, foreshadow the obstacle, highlight the main character's epiphany, navigate the last major obstacle and climactic conflict, and bring about resolution and closure.

With *The Eagle Huntress*, the filmmaker had a compelling and appealing lead character, a powerful against-all-odds story, and a breathtaking setting. I understood the attraction — I too found myself focused on similar young wannabe hunters at the festival, some just twelve years old. With their golden eagles and their horses, the juxtaposition of youthful innocence with an apex predator in a hostile landscape had an irresistible allure. Of course, Walt Disney recognized this powerful

combination half a century earlier in *The Jungle Book*: Mowgli, the orphan boy, with his friend and protector Bagheera, the black panther, together navigating a perilous jungle setting.

JUDGES, VODKA, AND COPS

> *At first they are mild, but in the end they sting like a scorpion.*
> — Giovanni di Plano Carpini, *The Story of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars*

Aside from an increase in camera-toting tourists, the other thing that distinguished the 2017 festival from 2016 was a much larger police presence. Their main job was crowd control, trying to keep people back from galloping horses and swooping eagles inside the event ring. But there may have been another reason for having more of them around.

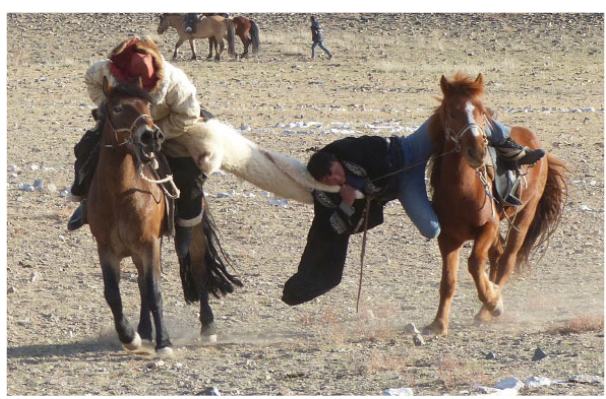
On a number of occasions during the events, I noticed some of the eagle hunters riding up to the platform of dignitaries, shouting and swearing angrily at the elderly judges. I had discovered during my homestays that over multiple festivals eagle hunters increasingly resented the way some of the events were judged. Many told me that the judges were biased, playing favourites with hunters they knew. The eagle hunters complained that only the judges saw the stopwatch used to time the competitors and their eagles. Essentially, the hunters felt that some of the events were fixed. The organizers might have wanted a greater police presence in part because they were anticipating trouble from the eagle hunters — and they were right.

The final event on the final day of the festival was the *Buzkashi*, meaning goat-pull. It involves two men on horseback, each grabbing an end of a goat that they then try to pull away from their opponent. (The *Buzkashi* event at the Ölgii festival, it should be noted, no longer uses the body of an actual goat.) Whoever accomplishes unquestioned possession of the goat goes on to compete against other winners, until there is a final *Buzkashi* champion. It's a variation on another game called *Kokpar (*or *kok-boru)*, which dates back at least to the days of Genghis Khan. *Kokpar* is a polo-like blood sport in which two teams of riders compete to deposit a headless goat into the other team's goal. As is the tradition, the winning team, at the

end of the event, is awarded the goat to eat. It is still very popular as a winter sport throughout the Central Asian “stan” countries.

As the *Buzkashi* event unfolded out on the pitch, the festival crowd watched in disbelief. The athleticism of the riders and their coordination with their mounts was nothing short of amazing. Some of the riders held on to the stuffed goat while being pulled nearly off their horses, only centimetres from the ground. The horses appeared to be simply an extension of the rider’s body, as if they were half man and half horse, like the mythological centaur. As the riders fought for the goat, the horses intuitively adjusted their gait, balance, and position, as a person would on solid ground with their own torso and legs. It made me re-appreciate both the horses and the hunters’ riding skills: hunting with a large eagle on one hand, the reins of a horse in the other, all the while negotiating snow-covered mountain ridges on a constant lookout for prey.

Buzkashi was an event unlike the others. It was extremely vigorous and physical, too challenging for most of the middle-aged or older eagle hunters. This particular competition was essentially a one-on-one battle between young bucks who knew how to ride. And unlike most of the other events, it wasn’t played against the clock — this was *mano a mano* stuff, with bruised bodies and bruised egos.



Buzkashi. Unbelievably, the rider to the right rode in this position for two minutes before finally securing the goat from the other rider and winning.

As the event continued, the testosterone levels rose like a thermometer in the sun. While young eagle hunters did participate, many of the competitors were not from the ranks of the eagle-hunting fraternity. The judges' strict enforcement of the festival rule that all participants had to wear traditional dress irked the rough and ready types. They made it abundantly clear that they had no interest in playing dress-up for the crowd. The assembled watched as the mood on the playing field became increasingly volatile with the addition of alcohol and the continued grumbling towards the judges that the fix was in. The large number of cops supposed to control the situation only added to the toxic mix.

Riders eliminated after losing a goat-pull were supposed to leave the event ring. Many of them didn't. They stayed, joining the other competitors, milling around on horseback. The judges, through a blaring loudspeaker, instructed them to depart the competition area. Many of the riders shouted back angrily. After several disobeyed warnings, the judges told the cops to move the disqualified riders out of the event ring. A half-dozen cops came into the ring on foot, among twenty or thirty horseback riders. This, of course, is opposite to the position police normally take when dispersing a crowd. Now it was the cops who were on foot trying to control men on horses — a procedure I'm sure no police manual would recommend.

The police, however, had an equalizer: hand-held electric prods. Unable to get the horses and riders to disperse, a cop shoved his prod into the chest of one of the horses. It reared up in shock, throwing its rider to the ground. Other horses nearby similarly reared in panic. The shocked horse stumbled, lost its balance, and toppled onto the fallen rider. With that, all hell broke loose. The *Buzkashi* and eagle-hunting riders en masse chased after the cop, who ran for his life, as did his colleagues. Rocks rained down on the judges, forcing them off the stage. Instantly the event ring became a blurred fury of confusion: clouds of dust, pounding hooves, flapping wings, flying fists, and stones and the tourist crowd in flight, running this way and that. A cultural festival meant to celebrate Mongolia's rich heritage morphed into something else, something that echoed back to the darker edges of Mongol identity. The mayhem continued as the rider lay unconscious and motionless on the

ground. Through the stampede of people and horses, I saw somebody desperately pounding his bare chest, trying to revive him.

More police arrived, as well as a few more ambulances. I figured the festival had come to an unceremonious end. I doubted that decorum could ever be restored. There seemed to be no other choice but to forgo the last few rounds of *Buzkashi* and dispense with the final award ceremony. But, little by little, things began to settle down. Within an hour, the judges had retaken their seats, and the festival limped on. When the final event was over, the judges handed out the awards to various participants — which provoked more altercations, rock throwing, fights, and bitter exchanges. The judges once again had to scatter and were lucky to get out with their lives.

In the end, police arrested and carted away twenty people. The authorities later laid charges against a thirteen-year-old boy who filmed and posted the melee online. The rider who was thrown from his horse reportedly recovered.

HUMANS AND ANIMALS

> *Animals . . . are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time.*
> — Henry Beston, *The Outermost House*

Ethnobiologically speaking, the eagle festival was fascinatingly strange. On the one hand, the human/golden eagle relationship is a union of opposites — an extremely social being and another that is highly solitary. On the other hand, it is highly complementary — the apex land predator and the apex air predator, united by a common purpose. But with eagles, what they do is who they are. With humans, it's far more complicated.

The complexity of this odd alliance led me into other tangential ideas regarding our relationship with animals in general. Our perceptions regarding specific animals begin at a very early age. A variety of experiences and sources formulate, reinforce, or dispel our attitudes: the stories we hear, the views and prejudices of others, our own experiences, our individual nature and disposition, and the chemicals and neurons buried deep inside our hippocampus. Rationally or not, we classify

animals according to a number of criteria: their appearance, their size, their rareness, whether or not they are tameable, and whether or not they might hurt us or eat us. And, generally speaking, there is a collective consensus on such feelings — but not always. Religion, culture, geography can all be overriding factors. For instance, depending on where in the world a cow is standing, he might be potential hamburger or a deity, as is the case in India. Some people hunt and kill for sport the same wild birds that other people spend time and money to feed. Some buy expensive paintings of the wild kingdom's great mammals to mount on their walls, while others mount only their heads. Whales, once hunted to near extinction, are now publicly venerated and used to solicit millions of dollars in adopt-a-whale fundraising campaigns. From the viewpoint of the animal, getting a read on the human thought process must be very confusing.

In the winter of 2011, I travelled through the state of Rajasthan in India. In the desert city of Churu, I accompanied a woman who wanted to visit a Jain nunnery. Jain is an ancient religion, an early offshoot of Buddhism. The women at the monastery were dressed in white flowing linen and wore white plastic masks that completely covered their mouths. They kept the masks on even when talking. This ultra-religious sect takes a strict vow of non-violence. They walk barefoot, including on long pilgrimages, to lessen the chance of killing any crawling bugs. So while the rest of the world is in the habit of exterminating all manner of insects with assorted insecticides, these religious devotees mask themselves on the off chance that a tiny insect might inadvertently enter their mouths and die.

The Triumvirate, 2018, mixed media, 19 x 29 inches

I observed an even odder human-animal relationship a year later when I visited the Karni Mata Temple in Bikaner, Rajasthan. Hindus from all over India and across the world come to pay homage and help feed the temple's occupants: twenty-five thousand black rats that have the run of the place. While the general consensus is that these are repulsive, disease-carrying rodents, the rats at this temple and their offspring are regarded as sacred gods and treated as such. Each day a crew of cooks keeps busy heating up monstrous cauldrons of specially prepared food for the deities. All pilgrims must remove their shoes to enter the temple and devotedly stroll its heavily soiled floors in their socks or bare feet.

In my culture, the dog, more than any other animal, has finagled its way onto the express elevator to social acceptance and hit the top button. Keeping the doors closed, it has ridden all the way up to the luxury suite. Its meteoric rise has taken it from the doghouse to the penthouse within my lifetime. The dog's station in Western culture is now so advanced it's hard to discern who is serving whom. In many cases, the dog is no longer regarded as an animal or even a pet. Rather, it has advanced to the rank of family member, even surpassing certain other members of the family. "I don't really understand that process called reincarnation," Leonard Cohen once said, "but if there is such a thing I'd like to come back as my daughter's dog."[33] In contrast, two billion Muslims generally view dogs as filthy and offensive animals.

Humans have spent thousands of years in an effort to figure out what different wild animals can do for us — that is, which can be domesticated, which can be trained, which can be ridden, which will do reward-based tricks, which can pull a plough, which will fetch, and which will help us hunt and, as in the case of the golden eagle, even kill for us. To provide us with food or furs, some of the smaller wild mammals like rats, rabbits, hamsters, and guinea pigs have proven relatively easy to domesticate, as have bird species, such as chickens, turkeys, geese, and ducks. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel,* Jared Diamond writes that out of 148 large (over one hundred pounds or forty-five kilograms) herbivorous land mammals, humans, through a

long process of trial and error, have successfully domesticated only fourteen. Within the fourteen he then identifies the major five: sheep, goat, cow, pig, and horse. Some of the lesser nine are the camel, donkey, reindeer, water buffalo, and yak.

Other animals have been put to use by people, such as the elephant. Diamond, however, makes a distinction between a captured animal that has been tamed and a domesticated animal fed and selectively bred in captivity. Another difference between the taming and domesticating of an animal is that over time the domesticated animal evolves characteristics that differ, sometimes widely, from that of its wild cousins. The nomad hunter's pampered eagles would of course fall into the captured and tamed category.

. . .

But the esteem most people feel for the golden eagle is not universally shared. Sheep ranchers in the southern United States, for instance, would be struck dumb to see a golden eagle occupying its own corner of a Kazakh nomad's family kitchen, housed, fed, and cared for like a family member, out of the wind and cold, in a place where it could relax, roost, and defecate. They'd really scratch their heads if they knew that the place of honour was inside the kitchen of a sheep and goat herder.

Many American ranchers in the mid-twentieth century attempted to eradicate the golden eagle (and, to a lesser extent, the bald eagle). They claimed this was the killer responsible for a significant number of dead spring lambs and other small or immature livestock. A 1952 article in *Flying Magazine* quotes one rancher as blaming one golden eagle for killing ten of his lambs in a single day. Rifles were an effective control only if the rancher could get within range. Golden eagles are naturally inclined to avoid humans anyway, and doubly so if the human is carrying a rifle. Baited carcasses poisoned with strychnine or sodium monofluroacetate were also used to kill the birds, but this technique killed too many other animals.

In the 1940s, Texas ranchers began to use airplanes to hunt eagles. A feature article in *Life* magazine in 1949 told how one pilot, John Casparis, claimed to have killed 1,008 golden eagles

in one year. The most effective method of killing was with a shotgun, shooting out the side door of the plane. In a twenty-year span, between 1941 and 1961, an estimated twenty thousand golden eagles were killed this way.

The United States Congress passed a law in 1962 protecting golden and bald eagles. The law also protects their feathers, eggs, and nesting spots. At first the law had little effect. Individual governors of any state could request an exemption. Texas simply ignored it altogether. Slowly, over time, attitudes shifted and strengthened laws backed by court rulings began to protect eagles effectively. Now the more common method for getting rid of problem eagles is to use live traps and relocate them. But that hasn't completely ended the untimely demise of golden eagles in many parts of the Western world. Most deaths are still attributable to human activity: poisoning from lead shot in wild animal carcasses, flying into wind turbines, and loss of habitat to urban and agricultural sprawl.

. . .

What makes the raptors unique in their relationship with falconers is that the bird must have opposing attributes — to be a wild, natural-born killer that can nonetheless be controlled. This is like the military recruiting Mafia hit men to be Green Berets — an analogy that in the last few years has become surprisingly apropos.

Paris, January 7, 2015. A small group of armed men enter the magazine offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and kill a dozen of its staff. Later that same year terrorists spray bullets through a Parisian concert hall, a bar, and a restaurant, killing 130 people. Shortly after that, in Nice, a terrorist driving a truck mows down and kills eighty-four people and injures one hundred more. France is thrown into a state of emergency. The French believe it possible that hard-to-detect weaponized drones could be the extremists' next mayhem-delivery system. And so the government directed a small unit of the French Air Force to begin work on a new tactical weapon. They already had a potent air-defence system that included the Meteor, an air-to-air missile with active radar-seeking capability. That system was further improved with a land-to-air missile, the

Mistral 2, a guidance system frighteningly labelled “fire and forget it.” But to defend against nimble, radar-elusive drones, they needed something more surgical.

Golden Eagle successfully attacking a drone (Georges Gobet-AFP-Getty Images)

France’s answer was an aerial weapon, both new and old: golden eagles — nature’s own self-directed attack-drone. The French Air Force recognized that the golden eagle, already used by the military in the Netherlands, had innate assets: amazing aerial speed and agility combined with a deep-wired, hunt-to-kill instinct, a skill set that evolution had perfected over tens of millions of years.

The French hatched and raised four golden eagles. Intensive training followed, and eventually the eagles were taught to capture drones out of the sky. These eagles didn’t need the parental training and inborn wildness that Kazakh eagle hunters require. Compared to wary and evasive wild game, the drones are easy, slow-moving targets. The French would employ the eagles over sensitive areas such as airports, power stations, government institutions, political summits, and military installations. They named the eagles after the Four Musketeers: d’Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. In their reward-based training, the eagles were fed fresh meat, with a drone as their dinner plate. The eagle enlistment is so successful that the French planned to train a second brood.

Recently, however, one of the golden eagles attacked a five-

year-old child, forcing the air force chiefs to reassess this new anti-drone defense system.[34] And it has also become apparent that eagles don't need to be trained to successfully take down drones. An Australian mining company reported losing nine survey drones to eagle attacks at a cost of $75,000.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Killing for Sport

For a thousand generations, this life-and-death drama plays out daily on the Altai foothills and across the barren steppes of Mongolia. Both the golden eagle and the red fox are credited as highly accomplished predators. But here in the elevations of Central Asia the fox operates with the knowledge that it can be the hunted as well as the hunter.

From the air, the pre-eminent hunter, evolved over millions of years to become a highly weaponized, self-directed assassin, willing and able to attack almost anything. In the proximity of such an adversary the fox, a keenly aware, quick-witted escape artist considered the most successful land mammal in the world, has no choice but to assume the role of the hunted. The golden eagle is regarded as successful even with an 80 per cent failure rate. But the red fox's odds are measured differently. It will lose even if it succeeds in escaping 99 per cent of the time.

We hunt animals for food, for hides, to protect our crops, and for self-preservation. But why do we kill for sport? During my time in Bayan-Ölgii with the individual eagle hunters and at the two festivals, the age-old issue regarding the ethics of hunting wild animals for sport quickly came to the surface.

Examples of trained animals that are manipulated to kill for people are rare. Fishermen in China and Japan have used cormorants to catch fish. A few types of dogs have been specifically bred to kill, such as the diminutive terrier breed, which will dig to find burrowed rats. The house cat hunts and kills mice (and, unfortunately, birds) in an attempt to earn its keep. Hunting cultures, such as the ancient Egyptians, successfully trained cheetahs and snow leopards. But animals, such as birds of prey, that do the actual killing — that are the substitute for a person's arrow, spear, bullet, or trap — are exceptional.

Those Who Hunt with Eagles, 2018, mixed media on paper, 14.5 x 21.5 inches

Of course, all over the world people hunt and kill animals for sport or entertainment. Six kilometres offshore from my home at the southern end of Georgian Bay is privately owned Griffith Island. Its 930 hectares are reserved for members to target shoot and hunt. Every spring I'm greeted with the melody of returning songbirds and the *boom*, *boom*, *boom* blasts of shotguns firing at skeets.

The Griffith Island Club employs a staff of approximately thirty and has an airstrip, a private ferry, games room, dining room, club lounge, and sleeping accommodation for around twenty-two people. Unless you're rich you need not apply — membership costs upwards of $20,000 annually. To make sure the members have something to kill, thousands of pheasants are cage-raised on the island and then released in the fall. Staff prepare the slain birds, which are served to the hunters in the club's dining room or else taken back home with them, made into pies.

Hunting domestically raised birds lacks a certain degree of sportsmanship, but then again, one could argue it differs only in degree from raising farm animals for slaughter. Maybe we need a specific word when combining animal farming with the act of hunting, like *funting* or *harming*.

Our inclination to hunt and gather is set deeply in our mammalian brains. We started down that road long ago, and to some extent we continue on it still. When humans walked the Earth as nomadic hunters, gatherers, and foragers, we regarded

the natural environment as both potentially dangerous and life sustaining, and so our ancestors venerated many elements in nature and often saw within them a spiritual context.

With the advent and success of agrarian society, people learned to plant and grow their food, domesticate their own animals, and build permanent dwellings. They had less and less need to hunt and gather in the wild. Rocks, trees, bears, and windstorms no longer held the same animalistic or spiritual significance; they were simply hindrances to progress. Pushing back against the threat of a wild environment became an early agrarian preoccupation.

Even though we have hugely diminished natural habitats, humans continue to, consciously or unconsciously, push back and control the unpredictability of nature. Hunting, I believe, is a remnant of that deep-seated need to keep wilderness at bay.

The modern hunter can offer a number of reasons for continuing to hunt wild animals: for food, for furs, or because certain animals are dangerous or deemed a nuisance. The hunting fraternity argues that without hunting, the natural balance will go askew. Some claim that hunters and their organizations are the foremost advocates for the preservation of the wildlife's natural habitat.

A hunter as the preserver of wildlife is like the fox volunteering to guard the henhouse. This reminds me of the stance taken by US gun lobbyists: if more people had more guns there would be less violent crime. Hunting organizations propose that in order to conserve more land for wildlife, we need more hunters as members — that is, people with guns who want to kill animals. Only sport hunters could convince themselves that more hunters equals a defence of wildlife.

If we really wanted to protect wildlife, we'd have government regulations requiring us to leave them and their habit alone. In the postmodern, technological world, it's hard to see hunting as anything but a remnant of our past, once meaningful and necessary, that is now recreational entertainment.

One subset of the sporting fraternity that is particularly hard to understand is that of the trophy hunter: people who pay, usually substantial amounts of money, for a licence to kill some large, rare, or exotic animal. In places like Africa, exotic big-

game hunting is a big business and a major source of revenue for governments, guides, equipment suppliers, lodge owners, and travel agents.

The ethical and moral issue of pay-to-kill hunting went viral in the summer of 2015, when American dentist Walter Palmer lured a thirteen-year-old lion named Cecil out of his sanctuary and shot him with a bow and arrow. It took another half a day to track and finally kill Cecil. The black-maned lion was a favourite with tourists to the Hwange National Park. Palmer had paid the government of Zimbabwe $54,000 to obtain the proper permits for the trophy kill.

Hunting is indisputably still part of what humans do. In my culture, government laws and regulations, together with lobbyists, hunting clubs, and sports equipment manufacturers, have helped to weave hunting into the fabric of our society. In Alaska (and many other states) there is nothing that moves that, with a permit, can't be shot at some point during the year. In 2007, 1,900 brown bears were killed as part of that year's hunt. In Ontario one can get a permit to hunt almost anything: moose, elk, deer, black bears, foxes, wolves, coyotes, rabbits, racoons, black and grey squirrels, skunks, possums, weasels, birds, fish of all kinds, dozens of waterfowl, and even frogs. About the only thing you can't shoot are red squirrels, which are perhaps the one thing you *should* be able to shoot.

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What seems to immediately follow all successful big-game hunts, as if it were a requirement of the permit, is the obligatory photograph. The hunter with his dead quarry: it is a repetitive image taken a million times since the invention of the camera box and light-sensitive paper. The animal species and the individuals differ, but the photographs are all the same. Its preponderance raises the question: what is more important — the killing of the animal or its documentation? Maybe the photograph is just there to show friends: *Look what I did!* The composition of the photograph often tries to show the dead animal as proportionately bigger than the person. And size matters. It elevates the act, positioning the hunt as more heroic, leaving the viewer with the impression that the killing

was an against-all-odds kind of confrontation. This harkens back to man as hunter-gatherer, when family and tribe relied upon him to be the provider and protector.

Where do the Mongolian eagle hunters fit in this debate? Although they make use of all the meat and furs from their hunts, they are hunting wild animals with their eagles for sport. If they wanted to obtain wild game only for food or furs, they would hunt with high-powered rifles and not bother putting in the time and effort it takes to obtain, train, and care for eagles.

It's worth remembering that for the Kazakh hunters what they hunt and how they hunt — a man (or woman), a horse, and an eagle — are exactly the same as they were a thousand years ago on those same steppes. There have been no additions, no modernizations, no innovative technologies. Little wonder that they constantly made reference and comparisons to their eagle-hunting forefathers and to the eagles they flew. Coming from our pampered society, I found it hard be critical of people who, without our conveniences or safety nets, live or perish by their homegrown skills. The country's rugged topography and severe climate makes survival almost as precarious for them as the wild animals they hunt. They walked the talk. Still, inwardly, I retained a keen discomfort with the notion of killing anything for sport, whether part of an age-old tradition or not.

THE HUNT

> *Often a man who is afraid must constantly demonstrate his courage and, in the case of the hunter, must keep a tangible record of his courage.*
>
> — John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*

In 2016, I joined Dosjan's other clients to observe a nomads' daylong hunt using golden eagles. This was the first hunt of the season and, as usual, it commenced in late fall (called *kansonar*, or "first snowfall"). The hunting season continues until early spring.

The hunt location that day was a ragged string of low ridges sitting on the eastern flank of a flat plain. As the six hunters, with their eagles, rode along the mountain crest, we tourists

tried to follow them in a number of four-wheel-drive SUVs, sixty metres below. Golden eagles always attack downward, so hunters seek to locate prey from a high vantage point. To scare the prey out of their dens and hiding places, "beaters" accompanied the hunters, riding through the mountain terrain at mid-elevation.

After a morning with no success, the hunters shifted location to an adjacent mountain ridge. By late afternoon the sky had become overcast with leaden clouds. Then snow started to fall, and fall heavily. Through the squall, the horses and riders lost their definition on the ridge, becoming dull silhouettes against a blurred sky. To those of us watching, they appeared like ghost riders emerging out of the past before melting away again into the snow.

The scene looked like a fine pointillist painting in monochrome tones. In the hour or two that passed, I felt like a time-traveller, glimpsing ancient hunters riding between heaven and Earth. The damp, ashen veil of snow muffled all sound as the land remained windless, grey, and silent. It conjured up a time more feral, a time void of rifles, when the triumvirate — the horse, the rider, and the messenger of death — ruled the steppes.

. . .

The following year, Dosjan arranged the same sort of hunt for his clients. This time he had a bigger tourist list: twenty people, from all over the Western world, most of whom were drawn to Mongolia after seeing *The Eagle Huntress*.

On the morning of the hunt, we all packed into six or seven Toyota Land Cruisers and headed off to meet up with the eagle hunters. Six of the hunters were gathered together on the open steppes waiting for us. They wore their heavy, black, knee-length winter coats and traditional thickly lined red hats. Like their eagles, the hats had two large side wings and a long fabric tail that covered the neck and upper shoulders. Atop their hats were tufts of eagle-owl feathers called *ukhu*. Some of their golden eagles had similar owl tufts pinned to their backs. Eagle hunters widely used this fluffed *ukhu* feathering. I had read one reference to the *ukhu* that claimed it was first used as an

amulet, endowing the bearer with the owl's strength and cunning, saying that the eagle-owl was the only thing the golden eagle feared, apart from humans. But an eagle hunter told me that it was simply a decorative tradition.

The temperature that day was below freezing, yet most of the riders wore no gloves. They sat cross-legged on the ground as their mounts browsed the surrounding dead grasses. By this time, I knew and had stayed with many of them, painted them and their eagles, and given them reproductions of my work from the previous year. Beken, Tenelhan, Leikhan, and Kenjebek, in typical Kazakh fashion, greeted me with a warm embrace, as if I were a lifelong friend.

This wasn't a contrived hunt conducted for the benefit of tourists — at least, not exactly. These guys all lived in the area and regularly hunted together, for companionship and also for the benefit of their eagles. A younger eagle will learn how to be a better hunter from watching a more experienced bird. Also, bigger prey, such as wolves, usually requires the combined strength of two or more eagles to take down. Only a very small percentage of golden eagles are willing to risk attacking a full-grown, seventy-five-pound (thirty-four kilogram) wolf alone. The other hunters hold such eagles, and their masters, in high regard.

With a wolf, the eagle will usually fly low behind it and attack from the rear. Upon contact the eagle will first grasp the snout and lower jaw in one set of talons, locking the wolf's mouth shut. The eagle uses its other set of talons to latch on behind the wolf's head, grab its upper spine, or attack the chest to constrict the animal's heart. There is YouTube footage showing golden eagles successfully attacking a Himalayan wolf, but Kenjebek told me that the animal shown was actually a captive wolf, released specifically so someone could film the attack.

Often overlooked in the eagle and rider combination is the horse. This is an animal that needs to stay cool and calm even as huge, razor-sharp talons, massive wings, and a flesh-ripping mandible are positioned a couple of feet from its eyes. The hunters told me that only a select few of their many horses find the close proximity of a golden eagle unthreatening. Beken said that he has a method that quickly tells him which horses will

accept and trust the eagle as a riding companion. It involves slowly bringing the eagle towards the front of the horse. With both the smell and the sight of the eagle, the horse will quickly announce whether or not the apex predator is an acceptable and trusted travelling companion. The captive eagle, I was told, never shows any fear of the horse.

I wondered if the horse is also eager to go hunting. But then again, unlike the rider and the eagle, the horse isn't carnivorous. Nothing in its history suggests it possesses an instinct for hunting or killing.

As the hunters rode into the mountains, most of us left the warmth of the SUVs and tried to follow on foot. Unlike the 2016 hunt, in 2017 no snow was on the ground. There was a high cover of broken clouds with a moderate gusting wind out of the west. Chasing up and down mountain slopes after the hunters, we soon began to sweat, so that we gradually became chilled to the bone whenever we paused to rest. Typically, when walking upwards in mountain altitudes you have too many clothes on and, soon after stopping, not enough.

By late morning the riders and we camera-toting followers were strung out across a couple of kilometres of mountainous rubble. No attempts at hunting had been made; nothing had been spotted. At noon, we piled back into our SUVs and headed to the tiny settlement of Tolbo to warm up and grab a packed lunch to eat.

A crudely poured cement sculpture with two parallel ten-metre-high stilettoes, side by side, jabbing the sky, stood at the northern entrance of Tolbo. Below the thrusting pinnacles were two larger-than-life concrete busts of a Soviet officer and his Mongolian comrade. The commemorative sculpture is the often-seen propaganda piece that the Soviets habitually used to memorialize solidarity among comrades from satellite states. Tolbo was close to the location of a major battle that took place in 1921 between the Bolsheviks, the White Russians, and the Mongolians for control of the country's western frontier. The cement sculpture was installed in the 1980s. Over the intervening years, vandals had badly beaten, battered, and gouged the features of both faces.

Tolbo sat in the middle of a large, flat valley. The town's architecture made Ölgii look like the historical section of

Quebec City. Its buildings were all squalid and sand-blasted low-level hovels. The place felt as though it could have been lifted directly out of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. The settlement was little more than a random collection of shacks, a combination of corrugated metal, warped plywood, cardboard, cracked glass, and windows covered with metal grating, held together by wire and a crumbling mix of cement, sand, and rubble fill. Paper and plastic garbage lay and blew everywhere. The settlement had a Siberian aesthetic combined with a nomadic lineage, which announced that its inhabitants were committed to absolutely nothing.

After lunch, I decided to take a walk through Tolbo's deserted, wind-whipped streets. One of the group, a guy from New Orleans, accompanied me. William had an easy laid-back manner and a look that reminded me of the Dude in the movie *The Big Lebowski.* We ducked into a hut with a faded red Cyrillic sign over the door indicating that it might be some sort of store. It was dark inside, the main illumination coming from two dirty, metal-grilled windows. It was a store with a severe product slant towards alcohol, the sparkle of colourfully labelled glass bottles taking up about half the shelf space and a third of the floor. Given the settlement's ambience I understood the store's emphasis. Kazakhstan produces seventy-four brands of beer, while Russia makes 111 brands of vodka — and that store, I swear, carried just about all of them. This was okay with us as we were looking to drink. I didn't have my wallet with me, but William had brought some *tugriks* and paid a short, brutish-looking woman for one litre of beer and another of vodka.

Mongolian currency takes some getting used to. They have no coins, only bills, and you need a pile of them. One Canadian dollar is worth about two thousand *tugriks*. The dominations are mostly in the five hundred to fifty thousand range (worth $0.25 to $25). When I first arrived in Mongolia and was unfamiliar with the currency, a store clerk in Ulaanbaatar pawned off a huge pile of brand new ten-*tugrik* bills on me. I soon found out no one would take them; they were each worth half a cent.

After eating a light lunch, we regrouped, piled into our Land

Cruisers, and headed back over the plains toward the mountain ridge. Multiple streams of airborne earth trailed behind each vehicle. Wisps of snow, mixed with bits of sand and gravel, flew across the windshield. The temperature was noticeably dropping, and the group's enthusiasm for seeing an eagle hunt had definitely waned. The hunt was for animals of any size, but the hunters' focus was squarely on the red fox. Yet we had seen no wildlife at all, except for a few hundred curious gerbils peering out of their little holes as we tramped across the mountain terrain.

At the edge of the flats the hunters mounted up and continued to track along the same mountain ridge, picking up where they'd left off before lunch. As the hunters rode southward, some of the group stayed in the vehicles to keep warm while others continued on foot, following the riders as best they could. After a couple of hours of no sightings, the hunters, the beaters, the followers, and the vehicles reassembled at the base of a hollow. It appeared to be the end of an unsuccessful day of hunting. A couple of the hunters had already decided to head home.

Sandstorm seen from the mountain ridge (our vehicles and horses are to the lower left). Photo by Eli Kretzmann

We were talking in small groups, waiting for a few of the stragglers to make their way down from the mountains, when in an instant everything changed.

It came from the west, across the sprawling plain: a wall of wind-blown sand so strong that it nearly knocked everyone off their feet. Its approach looked as unreal as the phony, digitally enhanced sandstorm scenes in *The Mummy* movies. It came upon us with unholy wrath, as if the demons of Hades had been set loose. The wind and churning sand immediately enveloped us. Hats and other assorted things became airborne. Some people clung to one another for support; all of us tried to protect our cameras. I heard voices hollering and horses neighing as my field of vision collapsed to a few feet. I was squinting into the direction of the wind as the fuming earth howled around me. I tried to run but managed only to struggle forward, plodding against the wind, to reach the door of the SUV ten metres away. Sand and bits of gravel pelleted my bowed head and bent body. With near zero visibility, I luckily found the vehicle's door handle. As I opened the door, the wind sucked quantities of sand into the interior and threatened to rip the door off its hinges. I needed both hands to pull it shut. The SUV rocked back and forth as I listened to the sound of sand pelting its exterior. The view out the window suggested a blender mixing large quantities of fine sand with a smaller amount of air. Wind-driven particles, like sifted flour, continued to mist the inside of the SUV, coming through all the seams, seals, and minute cracks of the vehicle.

Experts claim that sandstorms in Mongolia and Central Asia, like some other natural disasters such as *dzud*, are getting worse. Climate change, overgrazing, erosion from runoff, agricultural practices, and water diverted to towns and cities are some of the reasons cited. Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, and northern China have the ingredients that favour sandstorms. In the spring of 2006 and again in 2017, two sandstorms hit China, each lifting and moving an estimated three hundred thousand tonnes of sand and dust into the air. In 2015, a sandstorm formed a ninety-metre-high wall and descended on a Mongolian Naadam festival.

Eight centuries earlier, Giovanni di Plano Carpini wrote about the climate he experienced in Mongolia:

> . . . we had to throw ourselves flat to the ground
> because of the force of the wind, and there was so

> much dust we could hardly see. In winter it never rains there, while in summer it often does, but so little that it can hardly soak the dust and roots of the pastures. . . . And in summer there may suddenly be extreme heat and then suddenly extreme cold. During the winter in one area a very great deal of snow falls, while in another very little.[35]

On average, the Kazakhs of Bayan-Ölgii endure sandstorms thirty to sixty days of the year. Some storms can cover huge areas and rage for weeks; others are local and are over within minutes. Fortunately, the latter is what descended upon us at that resting spot. People spent the next while talking and laughing about the wind's force and shaking out jackets, pants, hair, and hats. Then, just like that, everything changed again.

A sudden wave of commotion and shouting enveloped the group. Over a car's walkie-talkie I heard, "*Tyjiki! Tyjiki!*" Someone had spotted a fox. The four hunters with their eagles and the beaters quickly mounted and headed up the next incline. Some of the tourist group ran after them on foot, while others, including me, piled into vehicles. The Land Cruisers, one after another, sped off like cops on a chase.

A camera is a strange thing. It can make you a stranger to yourself. I doubt that more than a person or two in our group really wanted to see an eagle kill a fox. Nonetheless, we were all eagerly on the chase, desperate not to miss capturing the experience with our Nikons and Canons. The hunters and their eagles were on a mission to kill a fox, and we were on a mission to document it. For the next ten minutes, we were like paparazzi chasing a disheveled Hollywood starlet fleeing a late-night club. Why such eagerness to get the shot? None of us was on assignment as a photographer. When I asked my fellow travellers what they would do with all the photos they took once they returned home, most paused, shrugged, and said, "Nothing." Maybe we need the photograph to help turn those electrochemical memories into something tangible. Again I wondered: which is more real, the memory of an event or its documentation?

The fox was spotted midway up the foothill of the last mountain in the chain that we had spent the entire day moving

along. Its incline was not as steep as the others, which encouraged my driver to try to ascend it. I was being bounced around in the front passenger seat, while Freya, a young woman who worked as an editor in China, was in the back. With our wheels weaving and thumping over the rough terrain, we ascended the mountain. The beaters on horseback and the other SUV drivers were some distance behind us. Some of the SUV drivers hesitated because of the incline and uneven grade. The eagle hunters were too far behind to release their birds, as they had no visual contact with the fox.

As we drove, I glimpsed the fox in a panic up ahead, running this way and that, desperate to escape the vehicles and the beaters that were trying to corner him. There were brief moments when the animal slipped out of view, and then, frightened by a vehicle or a beater or a noise, reappeared in an attempt to escape or to find a safe hiding place. As the chase went on, the fox kept climbing, zigzagging up the foothill. Then, near the crest, it disappeared.

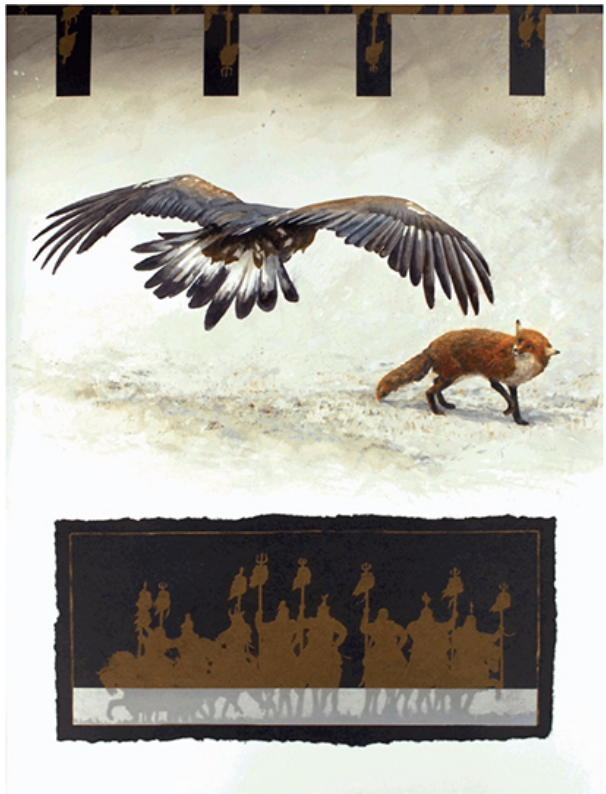
Sandstorm, 2018, mixed media, 9 x 8.5 inches

The rough, high slope didn't deter our driver — he was on a mission. We drove up to the very top of the mountain and paused, looking for our quarry out the vehicle's windows. We scanned the vicinity for a few seconds before I spotted him. He was tucked down, hugging the ground and staying perfectly still. His eyes looked directly into mine, as if saying, "Shhhh . . . please don't tell!"

. . .

The red fox is a highly adaptable, resourceful omnivore, found in a host of diverse environments: mountains, grasslands, deserts, forests, prairies, villages, and even cities. From the Arctic to Mexico, throughout North Africa, Europe, and Asia, the habitat of the red fox closely parallels that of the golden eagle, with the significant difference being that the fox is willing to live among people.

My first close encounter with a red fox had come a number of years before, out my back door. I live in a rural area at the edge of a small hamlet. It's not urban, but it's not wilderness, either. I noticed the footprints of a fox regularly around my compost pile and along the top of the stone wall that surrounds my vegetable garden. As spring went on, she came around more often. She was nursing and was thin and haggard. I knew she wasn't rabid, but her behaviour was odd in that she was totally unafraid of me. To help her out, I placed dog biscuits on the stone wall for her every evening. The crows soon learned this, so I had to try to hide the biscuits from the crows but not so thoroughly that the fox couldn't find them. By the beginning of summer, I put an end to that game, as the fox and I were no match for the crows. But by then the fox had learned to simply come and sit at the back door for her treat. I could tell when she'd arrived because of the cacophony coming from the birds and squirrels in the vicinity.



Fox Hunt #2, 2017, mixed media, 29 x 22 inches

This went on all summer, even when her cubs had grown big enough to go hunting with her. Though the cubs kept their distance, she would still come and sit at the back door. The youngsters would watch intently from a distance as I came out with food for her. Their collective look seemed to shout, “Mom! Are you friggin’ crazy?” I suspected the answer to that question was, unfortunately, yes.

The other memorable encounter I had with a red fox was on Baffin Island, backpacking through Akshayuk Pass (formerly known as Pangnirtung Pass) in Auyuittuq National Park. It’s a one-hundred-kilometre trek from the drop-off point at Mount Overlord across the Cumberland Peninsula. The route follows the southern edge of the Penny Ice Cap along the edge of the Owl River. From its midway point at the Highway Glacier and Summit Lake, east to the fjord on Davis Strait, the trail gets

infrequent use.

A couple of days' trek east of Summit Lake, I came across a mound of sand six metres in diameter and perforated with multiple holes — a significant red fox den. It was obviously active, based on the fresh tracks and feces around it. Since it was late in the day, I quietly pitched a tent about sixty metres away. The female stayed below ground while the male silver fox, a variant colour that occurs in about 5 per cent of red foxes, yipped at my tent. After a while the father allowed the five young cubs to come up. They too stared at the tent. Gradually they forgot about me and started to play with each other and with their uninterested dad.

An hour later the male left, to go hunting, I presumed. The young ones watched their father leave but didn't follow him, staying, instead, within a six-metre-diameter circle of their den. In the twenty-four-hour light of an Arctic summer, the comings and goings of the family could be observed all night. The cubs went crazy jumping up and down when they spotted the silver male returning to the den with food jammed in his mouth. Even in their excitement, a strict code of discipline ruled their behaviour. Although they wanted to run and greet their father, they stayed within their home boundary and waited for dinner to arrive.

. . .

I knew, with a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach, that my red fox encounter in Mongolia was not going to end with those sorts of wistful memories. It was obvious the hounded fox was totally exhausted. He just crouched down in the open, in hopes he wouldn't be seen. Then he took off, back the way we came, and circled around to the far side of the hill. Our SUV followed close behind.

Suddenly, two feet from my side window, immediately to my left (the car's steering wheel was on the right side) and a metre above the ground, its huge wings outstretched, a golden eagle silently glided past, tracing the ground's contours. The eagle disappeared over the slope just behind the fox. As soon as we rounded the slope we came to a stop. To my left, three metres away, the fox was on the ground with the eagle over it,

locked together and frozen in time.

Freya and I jumped out of the SUV, cameras clicking. For half a minute no one else was there, apart from the driver. The eagle's sharp talons pinned the fox to the ground, buried in the soft fur of the chest. The fox's eyes looked at the eagle. The eagle's head was arched back, away from the fox's jaws. The fox's sharp teeth briefly caught hold of the eagle's shoulder feathers. For a few moments they remained joined together — a postscript to the game of life. It reminded me of John James Audubon's *Eagle and Lamb*, where he depicts a golden eagle about to lock on to a prone lamb. Its composition captures the present and foretells the future.

Any ethereal poignancy that might have existed during those first few moments quickly evaporated as horses, hunters, and tourists, in multiple vehicles and on foot, descended. The fox was still alive. Freya and I both turned our backs and stepped away, wishing to be somewhere else.

Normally the hunter would kill the fox and then distract the eagle, offering it a piece of raw meat from his satchel so the eagle would let go of the fur. Otherwise the raptor won't let go until she feeds on the kill. Because of this, a chunk of raw meat is always kept on a hunter's person. This food transfer is a critical moment during any hunt, replacing the eagle's kill with another piece of meat. If the hunter tries to remove the prey without replacement food the bird's talons can rip the prey's pelt and precipitate a very aggressive and potentially dangerous response from the eagle. That could instill in the eagle a permanent distrust and resentment towards its master.

In this case, the hunter who arrived didn't have any raw meat to distract the bird, so he immediately commenced cutting off the fox's lower leg and using it to distract the eagle. But the fox was still alive. The tourist throng gasped, and some pleaded for the hunter to kill the fox. Then the hunter made a suggestion, translated by Dosjan, that the fox could be released so the people would get to see and photograph the hunt's climax, figuring that's why we were there. A chorus of angry shouting ensued: "Just kill the goddamn fox, will you!" The fox was killed.

During that evening and the next day, most of the group internally processed what had happened and exchanged

thoughts on how we felt about it. One thing was clear: we, the tourists, had contributed to the fox's death. Without a half-dozen SUVs tearing around, tiring it out and cornering it, the fox might not have been caught. It was like the British fox hunt: dozens of horses and hounds chasing and trying to kill a fox. For what — a traditional sport? Hunting with SUVs was the Mongolian equivalent, and we were all implicated.

Eagle and fox

Each of us had come from various places to Mongolia to learn how the Kazakhs hunt with golden eagles on horseback. We learned that, but we discovered something else, too, about ourselves. We had become trophy hunters, not with rifles but with cameras.

The brutality of the kill directly contrasted the general vibe we had all witnessed during the Eagle Festival. There, there was no blood, no killing, no mutilation or animal cruelty — just nomads handsomely clad in fox- and wolf-fur coats, riding their decked-out horses and calling their eagles to their arms, and beautiful children donning fox-fur hats, their majestic eagles perched calmly by their sides. Now we saw the flip side of that world — as the beef entrée is to the abattoir.

It was clear that the Kazakh eagle hunters did not share our Western-acquired sensitivities. How could they? Their nomadic life had no room for that sentimentality: born and raised in a

felt-lined *ger*, on a desolate sand-blown plain, in a bitterly cold climate with nothing but animal dung to keep them from freezing to death. Where would sympathy for the fox come from, if you depended on animal furs for warmth when herding sheep at minus thirty. What if wild predators and a winter *dzud* cut your herd in half, or if you had to scratch out a living for your family while huddled in the sand-blown outpost of Tolbo?

At dinner that night I asked several people about their thoughts and reactions to what we'd witnessed. Throughout the evening's discussion, Freya had a look of deep sadness. I was very interested to know how she felt about what we had both seen. From Beijing, a number of weeks later, she wrote me the following.

> As we had discussed at the last night [the evening after the hunt], we live in a total [*sic*] different world from Kazakh people, hunting is their culture, and maybe killing the prey is also an important part of the hunting. We have no right to criticize them or try to change their culture to match our values, instead I think the reason why we come to ölgii [*sic*] is to see a sort of cultural heritage which should be protected to keep existing as what it was.
>
> I cannot say Kazakh people are more cruel than us or did a wrong thing, but that doesn't mean I can accept what happened in front of me easily. Maybe I am just disappointed by the nature of human beings. If a hunter kills prey for surviving and his hunting is full of respect and apology to the animal, I think that will be totally ok. But when I saw a hunting just for entertainment, it is very sad.

Shortly after the trip, Dosjan emailed me and, I assume, his other clients, for feedback regarding the festival, the hunt, and his job as outfitter. I replied, in part, that the only thing that bothered me was the tourist vehicles' active involvement in stalking and cornering the fox during the hunt. In my opinion, this event should have been an eagle hunter's hunt — not seven SUVs chasing and exhausting a fox. I said that we, as tourists, should have been witnesses and not participants. To Dosjan's

credit, he wrote back to thank me and say he was in agreement. He pledged to make sure that vehicles will not take part in future hunts that his clients come to see.

CHAPTER NINE

The Spirit World

Crossing the creek, she picked her way over the bank's stony till. In a zigzag fashion the red fox stayed close to the large boulders and outcroppings. Even with the protective cover, her movements were calculated and cautious. As a nocturnal hunter, she understood that the light of day carried greater risks — there were different things to watch for, different things to fear.

High above to the east, the male golden eagle and his mate flew towards the vale. Through the rose-coloured light of dusk, they moved over the land like winged gods. It had become easier for the pair, now that their eaglet was almost fledged. They could leave the nest for longer periods and hunt together, which was what they preferred.

The male was the first to spot the movement — a blur of burnt sienna, slipping in and out of view on the uneven terrain. The female, farther back and flying below, didn't spot the fox at first, but she instantly comprehended what her partner had seen. Lowering her primary feathers, she descended to her left. The male stayed high and banked in the opposite direction. The female continued to coast downward then arced back towards the object of their attention. Meanwhile, overhead, the male made himself conspicuous. The pair had done this many times before.

Spotting the distinctive profile of the male eagle, the fox froze in place. Then, seeking a safe hiding place, she quickly backtracked, looking over her shoulder while trying to stay out of sight. Closing from the left, the female eagle, now just four feet above the ground, silently floated in. Against a backdrop of grey terrain and the day's fading light, her eyes glowed like smouldering embers.

Over the course of a couple of days after the eagle hunt, Dosjan had arranged for us (his clients) to camp out on the Mongolian steppes, far away from anywhere. Apart from anything else, the locale's emptiness acted as an effective catharsis following our fox hunting experience. Dosjan had erected a camp that consisted of seven or eight sleeping *gers* as well as a dining *ger*, another for food preparation, and one for his five-man staff. On

our last night Dosjan arranged a special event. After the evening meal, he invited the most renowned shaman in Bayan-Ölgii to perform a ritual ceremony for us. Dosjan was anxious to give his clients a window into the reawakening world of shamanism in Mongolia.

I saw small traces of that world in the daily lives of the eagle hunters. I saw it in the protocol used in slaughtering an animal, in freeing the year's first hunted animal, and in the right side/left side gender edict, in a baby's sleep preparation, and in the seating arrangements inside the family *ger*. These were not overt signs of shamanism, yet these rituals all came out of a distant past, when shamans decreed a hundred daily protocols that needed to be followed to ward off misfortune or placate a particular god.

Shamans, of course, are not unique to Mongolia. All through early human history, cultures relied on certain individuals to help solicit the power of a greater entity. In some societies, this person was referred to as medicine man or woman, oracle, sorcerer or sorceress, priest or priestess, sage, conjuror, seer, soothsayer, or faith healer. Special status was accorded those who were able to access and interrupt the mysteries of the unseen world. Depending on the culture, various methods were used to help transport the go-between to the other side. Some chanted and danced or blew into a conch shell; some used the help of hallucinogenic plants; others wore masks, or sculpted or carved or fasted. Some conducted ceremonies inside sacred temples or longhouses; others summoned the spirits with rattles, drums, or libations; and others required human or animal sacrifices.

Shamanism is closely aligned with animism, a belief that all animate and inanimate elements in nature — the wind, water, rocks, plants, animals, clouds, and fire — embody powerful spirits. Animism holds that these spirits have the capacity to affect the well-being and actions of people, particularly if certain taboos are broken. In Mongolia, shamans regarded the high Altai Mountains as sacred and highly auspicious, the connecting bridge between mortals and gods. Disturbing or disrespecting these high grounds — by digging or hunting, for example — was an affront to its deity. The current pervasive mining of Mongolia, some shamans believe, has riled the gods

and the spirits of the Earth. They foretell of severe retribution for such disrespect.

Today, most of the world has moved on. Scientists and technologists are now the door-openers and interpreters of what was previously unknown. This has unveiled and deciphered a thousand things: the origins of the cosmos, the riddle of the human genome, nuclear fusion, and much more. And yet, on the steppes of Mongolia, the power of taboos, the beating of the drum, the potency of libations, the fear of the demon's grasp, and the conjuring authority of the shaman's trance still hold sway.

THE FAITH OF THE NOMAD

> *An ancient Scythian nomad skeleton buried with an eagle was reportedly excavated near Aktobe Gorge, Kazakhstan. Ancient petroglyphs in the Altai region depict eagle hunters, and inscribed Chinese stone reliefs show eagles perched on the arms of hunters in tunics, trousers and boots, identified as northern nomads.*
>
> — Adrienne Mayor, "The Eagle Huntress: Ancient Traditions and New Generations"

The many shamanistic beliefs practised on the Mongolian steppes didn't end with the decline of the Mongols; nor had they started with them. Four thousand years ago, before the Mongols inhabited the district of Bayan-Ölgii and the Altai Mountains, the Scythians called this place home. They too were nomadic herders, also accustomed to inter-tribal warfare. They left no written record or above-ground ruins, so what we know about their culture is mostly gleaned from archaeological dig sites.

These excavations revealed an elaborate undertaking. They used large, wood-lined cribs for their burials. At the top level of the horizontally layered grave lay the deceased, his horse and bridle, weapons, food, pottery, wall hangings, and other furnishings. Below, another subterranean floor of wood timbers contained the master's concubines, servants, and the servants' horses.

Ancient petroglyph near Beken's winter dwelling in Bayan-Ölgii.

Because of consistently cold ground temperatures, many of these burial sites have been encased in ice for thousands of years — literally frozen in time. Some of the corpses are so well preserved that they reveal incredible details, such as tattooing. Researchers have found artifacts in near-perfect condition, including a sable coat, a colourful pile carpet, a silk blouse, and, in one tomb, a small fur bag containing cannabis seeds.

The discovery of numerous carved granite megaliths, called "deer stones," gives a further glimpse of the puzzling belief system of these early steppe people. These stone pillars, between one and five metres tall, date back three thousand years to the Bronze Age. Close to one thousand have been found across Mongolia and Siberia. They often depict the sun and moon and a variety of animals, most commonly a stylized flying deer. But apart from some sort of connection with burial customs, sacrifices, and afterlife rituals, their precise meaning and purpose remain unclear.

• • •

Genghis Khan and the Mongols of the thirteenth century had some understanding of the natural sciences, yet they mostly comprehended their world through a complex mix of dark magic and spirituality. Their shamans were their scientists,

tasked with explaining and guiding people through some of the hard-to-understand phenomena of life.

Marco Polo described how shamans directed the protocol for Mongol funerals:

> Sometimes the astrologers tell the relations that the body must not be taken from the house through the main door because they discovered from aspects of the heavens, or otherwise, that this would be unlucky, and it must therefore be taken out from a different side of the house. In some instances, indeed, they oblige them to break through the wall . . . if they refuse to do so, the spirit of the dead will be incensed against the family and do them some injury.[36]

Mongol horses were a key element in the burial ritual of important leaders, deemed necessary for the deceased to ride into the next life. In 1253, Franciscan monk William de Rubruck observed a funeral at which the skins of sixteen horses were hung on poles in groups of four, pointing towards the north, east, west, and south. Apparently forty horses were killed at the burial site of Genghis Khan. Even today some Mongolians sacrifice horses to allow travel to the other side.

Both men and women could assume the demanding role of channelling spirits to enter the ancestral past. Shamans were like cosmic time travellers on a pilgrimage to another dimension. With the insight they gained, they could advise a course of action or the remedy to a problem. Other times they would allow spirits, demons, or deceased ancestors to possess them, whereupon these ethereal forces would use him or her as a vessel of communication.

In the time of the Mongol Khans, no one would have considered getting married, going to war, or conducting a burial without advice from an important shaman or astrologer as to the optimal date for the event. William de Rubruck writes of the practices of Mongol shamans (referred to as diviners) he observed in 1253:

> They are also called in when a child is born, to tell its fortune; and when anyone sickens they are called, and

> they repeat their incantations, and tell whether it is a natural malady or one resulting from witchcraft . . . and when it is so cold from natural causes that they can bring no relief, they pick out some persons in the camp whom they accuse of having brought about the cold and they are put to death at once. Their diviners are, as Möngke Khan [grandson of Genghis] confessed to me, their priests; and whatever they say must be done is executed without delay . . . they predict the lucky and the unlucky days for the undertaking of all affairs.[37]

When I was with the Kharnakpa nomad tribe in Ladakh in the early 2000s I ran into this puzzling idea of days that were lucky and others to be avoided. I wrote about in my book *Wild Places Wild Hearts — Nomads of the Himalaya*.

> The Tibetan calendar, which the Kharnakpa use, remains an unfathomable mystery [to me] . . . it gets more complicated, at least the way the Kharnakpa measure days. For some reason, they will totally skip certain days in some months, leaving them out entirely, while other days will be counted twice. I was told the reason for having the same day twice was because it was especially auspicious.[38]

THE GREAT YASA

> *The Tartars say the sun is the mother of the moon because the moon receives light from it.*
>
> — Giovanni di Plano Carpini, *The Story of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars*

In 1206, Genghis Khan instituted a code of conduct for all Mongols to follow, called the Great Yasa. It was comparable to the Ten Commandments, although more wide-ranging. The Great Yasa ruled both personal behaviour at home and military conduct on the battlefield.

In some cases the Mongol law exempted, in differing degrees, soldiers, shamans, and nobles. The merciless punishments of the Yasa Code were meant in part to stop the endless disputes that had long kept the Mongol tribes in a state

of near-constant feuding, and they did. Murder, rape, adultery, sodomy, stealing, and kidnapping women among the different Mongol tribes were all acts, according to the Yasa, punishable by death. Failure to return found property, not repaying a debt, hunting out of season, feeding or clothing a captive without permission, taking a Mongol as a slave, and bearing false witness were also subject to the death penalty. The same applied to a soldier who was found to be a spy, a traitor, or a deserter, or who pillaged or retreated in battle without permission, failed to pick up a weapon on the battlefield, or killed children who were below the height of a cart's wooden wheel. Although the punishment was harsh, one needs to remember that the average person's life at that time was worth little more than that of a domestic animal.

Many of the Yasa laws fell into the realm of religious taboos rather than what we would consider laws of social conduct. These sprang from their shamanistic beliefs and were designed to prevent angering the spirits. Many of the taboos underlined the reverence the Mongols held for water, fire, and food, as well as their fear of thunder, lightning, and being poisoned. The Yasa forbade wasting, choking on, or spitting out food; entering, washing clothes, or urinating in running water; polluting ashes; hurting a horse; propagating forms of witchcraft; stepping on the threshold of a chief's tent; slaughtering animals except in the Mongol way (which prevented the spilling of blood); and slander, all of which were punishable by death. Furthermore, the family members of the accused were considered culpable in the above crimes, whether they were involved or not. Depending on which taboo was broken, the entire family might be punished or killed. Beheading was the most common death sentence, unless the guilty were of noble lineage, in which case they would be killed without shedding blood. Draconian as this was, historians point out that medieval Europe, China, and the Islamic states had equally harsh punishments for lesser offences.

Giovanni di Plano Carpini, the envoy of Pope Innocent IV, was an eyewitness to the Mongols' laws and taboos and their system of justice. During his 1246 trip into the heart of the Mongol Empire, Carpini wrote:

> Even though the Tartars have no law to do justice or prevent sin, all the same they do claim certain actions are sins which they or their ancestors have established. One of these is to thrust a knife into a fire or to touch fire in any way with a knife, or to pull meat from the flames with a knife, or to cut wood with a hatchet next to a fire. They actually believe that the head of the fire would be cut off in this way. Also, one must not lean on the whip with which one strikes a horse, or touch an arrow with a whip, or kill or catch young birds, or strike one bone with another, or toss milk or other drink or food on the ground. . . . If a person does this intentionally he is killed; if done otherwise he must pay a heavy fine to a sorcerer who purifies him, and he must have the tent, and all that is in it, pass between two fires . . . [39]

Carpini also observes:

> . . . if a falling star passes in the sky over herds or men, or if some such thing should happen to them, which makes them believe they are defiled or unlucky, they must be purified in a similar manner by incantations of sorcerers. . . . If a piece of food is given to anyone and he cannot eat it and spits it out of his mouth, a hole is made beneath the tent and he is drawn out through the hole and killed without mercy, and if anyone treads on the threshold of any prince, he is killed this way. And they have many similar customs that are too numerous to recount. . . . They place almost all their faith in such things.[40]

Given these deep shamanistic beliefs, it's doubly surprising that Genghis Khan also decreed laws that were enlightened and far ahead of their time. These included an acceptance of those who worshipped gods of different faiths, the legitimacy of children born to concubines, and laws improving the status of women, which was measurably better in their society than in China, Europe, or the Middle East. As well, the Great Khan initiated the twentieth-century concept of safe passage for all

ambassadors from foreign nations.

As previously mentioned, I became well acquainted with a number of nomad tribes in the Himalayan mountains of Ladakh. Even though they lived three thousand kilometres and eight centuries removed from the world of Mongol shamanism, many of their belief systems, taboos, and practices were exactly the same. The tribes I stayed with observed an earlier form of Tibetan Buddhism more closely aligned with Bon and animistic practices. Some of the similarities with the Mongols included the left side/right side division of their tents according to gender, reliance on astrologers to predict the future and to guide the present, the wide use of medicinal remedies, cauterizing nerve endings with hot irons to ease pain, sacrifices, and preserving their best animals for their gods. They too had a complex array of multiple deities that could be either benign or easily riled, depending on which taboo was broken. Appeasing these riled gods was a common, complicated, and time-consuming part of their everyday life.

. . .

During the period of Soviet influence over Mongolia, Tibetan Buddhism, shamanism, and all other religions were seen as incompatible with the ideals of a people's state. Old icons, heroes, histories, and long-held beliefs were expunged — but not completely. Although the Communists forbade it, the Mongolians continued to practise shamanistic rituals secretly, either inside someone's house or in a hiding place deep in the mountains.

Otshir Böö, a shaman photographed by Sakari Pälsi, 1909

Bogd Khan's Winter Palace, one of the very few Tibetan Buddhist monasteries that escaped Soviet destruction, sits directly south of the Tuul River (previously called Toula River) in Ulaanbaatar. In the summer of 1960, the worst flood in a hundred years hit Ulaanbaatar. The Tuul River overflowed, threatening the palace, built in a hollow. Miraculously the waters circled the grounds of the monastery and left the buildings completely unharmed. Even though Bogd Khan had been dead for thirty-seven years and his lamas and their institutions expunged decades earlier, the Mongolians saw the diversion of water that spared the palace as a sign of divine intervention from their deceased spiritual leader.

Like seeds that lay buried and dormant after a forest fire, a renewal of the Mongolians' shamanistic beliefs sprung forth after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In her book *Tragic Spirits*, anthropologist Manduhai Buyandelger writes that after the

disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, immediately throughout Mongolia "religious practitioners proliferated like mushrooms. Astrologers, fortunetellers, shamans and monks were everywhere."[41]

When the people of Ulaanbaatar pulled down the statue of Stalin after Mongolia gained independence, a shaman sprinkled the form with milk. The shaman's libations were required to prevent Stalin's demonic spirit from returning.

SHAMANS AND DEMONS

> *Thereupon the evil spirit, speaking through the mouth of the possessed person, answered that the sick man has insulted a spirit.*
> — Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*

The shaman's evening ceremony that Dosjan arranged was conducted outside, around a huge bonfire. Dosjan and his fellow Kazakhs didn't regard such ceremonies as entertainment, or a curiosity, or a vestige of antiquity. After Mongolian independence, the country's new constitution offered official protection to individuals who practised shamanism. Traditionally, both men and women have been, and continue to practise as, shamans in Mongolia. For most, it is not a role they actively seek; rather, they say, forces beyond their control have thrust shamanism upon them.

In the teeth of a cold, stiff wind, three-metre flames leaped from the blaze, fueled by a pyramid of logs and a sizable dose of accelerant. We all sat or stood in a circle, bundled, huddled, and freezing, watching the fire lick the night sky, its sparks mixing with a million stars. After a lengthy wait — by which time we were all chilled to the bone — we heard the sound of drumming and chanting coming from the darkness. Illuminated by the flames, the shaman entered the circle, dancing, swirling, and beating her drum. Two assistants followed.

The shaman's drum is important for making spiritual contact. The drum is the constructed union of horse and tree — skin and wood joined together as one. The shaman sees the golden eagle and the horse as the messengers or the conduits to the gods. Painted on the horse-hide surface of this shaman's drum were two eagles flying high in the sky.

The shaman was an older woman, big and dressed from head

to toe in multiple layers of fabrics ripped into long ribbons. The material swished and danced around her body as she moved. Hundreds of amulets and beads and small, shiny, mirror-like objects hung from her garb. A stringed veil of more strands of material draped from her ornate feathered headdress and hid her face. Two large eyes were painted on a bone-white headband. As she danced, chanted, and sang, beating the drum with her hand, the light and shadows from the fire and the movement of her costume gave her an ethereal presence.

She repeatedly flung libations skyward, summoning the spirits to come to her. Her offerings fell back to Earth, often pelting us with fermented milk, rice, and alcohol, precipitating a rise of muffled laughter from the crowd. At times her head bobbing, combined with her girth, nearly toppled her. Because of the gusting wind, there were brief moments when the flames enveloped her, as the onlookers gasped. The shaman seemed unaware that she could be set alight, but her two attendants followed her closely and at one point caught her as she was about to fall onto the roaring fire.

Shaman ceremony, 2017

We all have certain things we believe in, certain things we don't believe in, and certain things we are just not sure about. When it comes to most mainstream organized religions, I tend to be in the non-believer camp. Yet supernatural phenomena such as spirits, ghosts, and so on seem plausible to me, simply because of the volume of credible, firsthand accounts. I have a similar feeling about UFO sightings — I have had no personal encounters but feel there are too many reputable eyewitness accounts to dismiss them all. Billions of other galaxies and trillions of other planets surround us, so the odds of others being out there, somewhere, seem pretty good to me.

Over nine years, I had a close-up view of the belief system of the Tibetan Buddhist nomads of Ladakh, in the Central Himalaya. As mentioned, these people devotedly practise an early form of the Bon religion with a deep regard for shamanistic taboos. To this I was agnostic, refusing to either believe or disbelieve. Essentially, out of respect for them, I didn't want to sit in judgment.

With the shaman's performance that evening on the steppes of western Mongolia, for some reason, I felt differently. I wasn't buying it. Maybe it was because I saw it as a demonstration, simply a performance that Dosjan paid her well to present. (Certain shamans will not conduct their sacred rituals for public entertainment.) Or maybe it was because I now knew the history of this country. The Mongolian ground that shamans dance upon is saturated with human blood. The shaman's drumming, chanting, and libations did not prevent, appease, or remedy the violence of the Mongols and their various khans, or the Mad Baron and his mercenaries, or Ja Lama and his rebel band, or Stalin and his massive purges. These acts were not the result of a taboo that was broken or some demonic deity's instruction. These were behaviours that came from people, a product of our well-known propensity to behave badly. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said in the sixth century BCE, "Man's enemies are not demons, but human beings like himself."

But perhaps my skepticism also had something to do with the fact that I was beastly cold. At any rate, after about twenty minutes of chanting and drumming, the shaman abruptly stopped and simply walked off into the darkness, her assistants

following behind her. And that was that. After some puzzled looks and raised eyebrows, everyone retreated to the dining tent for warmth and to have something to drink. The discussion that followed was measured and respectful. I hid my more overt skepticism.

After a few hours of socializing I was ready to call it a night, and I left the dining tent and headed to my sleeping *ger*. All the sleeping *gers* were arranged in a large semicircle with their doors facing inward towards the dining *ger*. Installed in each *ger* was a small stove. The stoves had already been lit to provide the tents with some warmth for the night.

What the HELL!? I stopped dead in my tracks. Was I seeing right? Against the black of the night, flames shot from the top of a *ger* — my *ger*! The orange flame, a metre high, blasted from the five-metre high stovepipe.

I ran to the *ger* and threw open the door. The heat hit me as if I'd opened an oven to check on the turkey. The stove sat in the middle of the *ger*, glowing a ferocious crimson-orange. In the felt-lined tent the blaze roared like a caged beast. The sharp cracking of the stove's flimsy tin threatened to separate the its welds, joints, hinges, and plates.

I had some water in my backpack. Already the metal zipper on the pack was nearly too hot to touch. I sprinkled the surface of the firebox with water. The droplets exploded on contact. Three litres of water and fifteen minutes later, I had calmed the beast.

The whole thing was very strange — no one else's *ger* stove had erupted into an angry inferno. It was a puzzle. Later that night, lying in my sleeping bag I wondered. Could it be related? My skepticism, questioning the authenticity of the shaman's ceremony, and then, right after, my stove going bonkers? No, couldn't be. And yet, since the time of the Mongols, shamans have always relied on fire as a purifier, their go-to cleanser of bad energy. "They believe everything is purified through fire," Giovanni di Plano Carpini wrote in 1246. "Therefore, when ambassadors or foreign princes, or others, visit them, they and the baggage they carry must pass between two fires and be purified, lest perhaps they work a spell, or bring magic or some evil."[42]

I might have been tempted to forget all about this, except for

what came next.

The following day we all packed up and headed off to Khovd to catch our flight back to Ulaanbaatar. I was in an SUV, part of a six-vehicle convoy for what should have been a four- or five-hour trip. It started to snow heavily, and somehow the SUV I was in got separated from the convoy. Although the driver was from the area and very experienced, he got disoriented and then totally lost. Darkness descended — and so did a blizzard. Wind started to blow the snow into large drifts. All tracks disappeared. For hours, the driver could not find a way out of the mountains. Neither his walkie-talkie nor his cellphone would work. Finally, after many hours of high-stress driving, waiting, and backtracking through the darkness in the ongoing snowstorm, we arrived in Khovd.

I flew from Khovd to Ulaanbaatar and rented a room in the Lotus Guesthouse, the same place I had stayed before. I got the room key, put my belongings inside, and went to get something to eat. I realized I had forgotten my wallet and went back down the hall to my room, but the key wouldn't open the door. After ten minutes of trying, I got the night manager. She couldn't get my key or her key to open the door, either. After half an hour of trying all sorts of things, including the master key, the night manager pried open my door with a large crowbar.

I had an early morning flight out of Ulaanbaatar the next day, but I had time to get a real cup of coffee — my first in three weeks — from an excellent place right around the corner called Caffé Bene, part of a higher-end coffee and pastry chain in Ulaanbaatar. It opened at seven and my airport taxi wasn't picking me up until eight. I got to the coffee shop at seven fifteen. A bunch of people milled outside the front door. The staff huddled around the lock, trying to open the door. Not one of their keys would work. I waited for a while then went back to my room (I'd left it unlocked), thinking about shamans. Thirty minutes later I went back to the coffee shop. More people with different keys were still unable to get the door unlocked. I left for the airport without a coffee, wondering what was next.

I experienced a few other strange events upon leaving Mongolia, but thankfully the downing of my plane wasn't one of them.

Back in Canada I did some reading about other people's experiences with shamans. One particular newspaper article, written by Yoon Suh-kyung for the *Korea Herald,* jolted me. The article described a Mongolian shaman's ceremony:

> Dressed in a dark brown frock draped with ripped cloth and sparkling materials, she was an overwhelming presence. Hitting the gong rhythmically and chanting in the guttural tones of Mongolian. Baljimaa walked back and forth, calling for the gods to possess her body. For more than 30 minutes she chanted, rousing the crowd to the height of expectation. Then suddenly, she started to throw up . . . crouched at the corner of the stage. "My body has been tainted by people in the audience. Is there anybody who . . . is thinking bad thoughts about this ritual? If so leave!!" she growled.[43]

CHAPTER TEN

On the Borderline

She had done this many times before. It was a process the eagle understood and trusted. Hours of riding and waiting with her sight restricted by the leather hood. Cold wind against her body and the scent of fresh snow. Her shackled feet, her talons gripping thick leather, the horse's jostled canter, its heavy breathing, the creak of the saddle, multiple hooves breaking hardened snow, and the talk and laughter — this was all part of it, part of what she looked forward to.

Her hunger to eat was there. But even more, she hungered to hunt and to kill.

She and those with her were bound by that common goal. But only she would be trusted to play out the final act. She alone would assess, devise, and determine exactly when, where, and how to conduct the assault.

Those were the moments, the time between the locating and killing, for which she was so perfectly designed.

The house cat paused, yawned, and stretched out its back. It slowly crossed the kitchen floor to its favourite sleeping spot beside the stove. In the radiant warmth of burning dung, it sprawled out, completely relaxed. As it settled in for a late-afternoon snooze, I was also laid out on the floor, but not to nap. My nose was bleeding profusely, a daily occurrence during my time in the cold, freeze-dried atmosphere of Bayan-Ölgii's high elevations. I was lying with my head tilted back, pinching my nose and trying to stem the blood flow with wads of toilet paper. The nomad family whose kitchen floor I was bleeding on watched in silence, hoping this newly arrived boarder at their house wasn't about to die on them.

The cat and the nosebleed by themselves wouldn't have been particularly noteworthy but for what was perched a few feet above us: a magnificently huge female golden eagle. The eagle was oblivious to the cat, but that was only because a thin leather hood stood between a contented cat and a dead cat. Unlike the sleeping cat, I was acutely aware of my proximity to

this lover of fresh blood and raw meat. I was also aware that researchers have found that golden eagles in captivity, even as fledglings, are instantly aroused when shown anything bright red in colour.

ARDAKH

> *I was born on the prairies where the wind blew free and there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I was born where there were no enclosures.*
>
> — Geronimo

After the 2017 Eagle Festival, I hired another driver and reconnected with my interpreter to travel to the far southwestern corner of Bayan-Ölgii, along the Chinese border. Dosjan had arranged for me to stay with three more eagle-hunting nomads who lived there. One of the three was Ardakh, the middle-aged man whose kitchen floor I was bleeding on.

Ardakh, his wife, and their two children made their living herding two hundred sheep and goats. They had just moved into their winter house, which was located on a huge, flat plain of frozen ground, encircled by rolling ramparts that were now heavily snowbound.

To get there from Ölgii meant being jostled for six hours in an old UAZ-469, the stout Russian military-style jeep. The roads (or, more accurately, the lack of roads), the elevation of the terrain, the weather, and the time of year made the trip an adventure. We bounced over a repetitive series of mud ruts, semi-frozen swamps, desert sand, ice, snowdrifts, potholes, and boulder fields and crossed a dozen ice-lined streams.

On the way, we passed through two rough-and-tumble frontier settlements. Neither had a gas station, but my driver had anticipated this and filled two huge jerry cans with gasoline before we left Ölgii. They were in the back of the jeep, constantly seeping fumes. As the sun sank, cold invaded the jeep's interior to the point where I could no longer keep my side window open a crack to allow in fresh air. We had to keep scraping ice off the interior of the front windshield for the driver and me to see anything. I wondered what we'd do if this piece of Russian engineering broke down anywhere along that desolate prairie. If we left the jeep, we'd risk dying of exposure;

if we stayed in the jeep, we'd die of asphyxiation.

This area is the highest in Mongolia, with elevations exceeding four thousand metres. The thin air at these altitudes was often driven by wind that cut to the marrow. No matter its direction, it always came off snowfields, frozen glaciers, or icy peaks. It was only October, but the biting cold of the month had already frozen the ground rock-hard. My multiple layers of Gore-Tex, polar fleece, and high-tech thermal underwear were no match for this place. Seven hundred and sixty years earlier, William de Rubruck described his reaction to the Mongolian weather:

> That morning the tips of my toes were frozen. . . . The cold in these regions is most intense, and from the time it begins freezing it never ceases till May. . . . And if there were wind there in winter as with us, nothing could live. . . . When we were there, the cold that came on with the wind about Easter killed an infinite number of animals.[44]

Wooden and stone corrals ringed Ardakh and his family's flat-roofed adobe house. A layer of grey wind-blasted grit coated the exterior of every structure. The low outer door to the porch was lined with stapled fabric, inset in a hand-hewn wood frame. The same defence against the cold was used on the entry door to the kitchen. The kitchen's layout was similar to all of the other eagle hunters' winter homes: a dung-burning stove, a low dining table, small stools or benches, a lone solar-powered light bulb, a corner piled with a jumble of wires, converters, chargers, and batteries, perhaps a little hand-washing bowl somewhere, and often a perch in one corner reserved for their eagle. Ardakh's kitchen walls were decorated with a few brightly coloured travel posters — this was true of most of the eagle hunters' homes — depicting some place like Switzerland or Ireland, with lots of flowers and green grass. There was always a wall of framed photographs of family members, past and present, as well as various framed eagle-hunting and horse-racing awards.

A small shelf held plates, cups, bowls, and some of their limited foodstuffs. Like everywhere else I'd been in Mongolia,

dairy, bread, and meat was pretty much the sum total of what they ate. If you were vegan or intolerant to gluten — good luck.

Winter dwellings had an outhouse, two or three hundred feet from the house. Their summer *gers* didn't bother with one: on the flat steppes, without bushes, trees, or large boulders, finding a discreet spot (or not so discreet) a suitable distance (or not so suitable) from the *ger* was all that was required.

Ardakh had been an eagle hunter all his adult life, having acquired his first hunting eagle when he was sixteen. He told me only four of his twenty horses were suitable for eagle hunting. He kept those close by during the winter. The others fended for themselves. Nomad horses not only had to deal with the cold, the wind, and the frozen ground's limited nutrients, but they also had to fend off snow leopards and wolf packs. Rom, a neighbor of Ardakh's and another of the nomad hunters I stayed with, told me that the previous winter, during a one-week period, wolves had killed ten of his thirty horses.

Rom told me that snow leopards inhabit the higher elevations and will come down to prey on sheep and goats. Only on rare occasions do they attack horses. Wolves, however, pose a constant threat. I asked Rom if he ever considered using his eagle to hunt the wolf pack that killed his horses. He replied that the wolf is too dangerous for his eagle to hunt; instead, he attempted to hunt them with his rifle. He said in his father's and grandfather's time, eagles were larger and bolder and would more commonly go after a wolf.

Over the two years I went to western Mongolia, I stayed with seven eagle hunters, who had collectively caught and released over one hundred eagles. I continued to wonder how an eagle could go from being fed and cared for, for years, and then begin a successful life as an independent hunter in the wild. I asked each of these hunters if their eagles ever returned to them, either for food or companionship, after they had been released. Every hunter shook his head and replied, no, it had never happened. That is, except Rom. He told me that during one very severe winter, the eagle he had released that spring returned to him. It was starving. He fed it through the winter and then released it the following spring. He said he never saw it again.

Rom, 2018, watercolour, 12 x 15 inches

Unlike bald eagles, mature golden eagles are normally silent birds, only rarely vocalizing. When they do communicate, it is usually done during the process of courting and nesting or extreme agitation. The golden eagle perched in Ardakh's kitchen, however, constantly let out ear-piercing cries, even after being fed, like a smoke alarm that couldn't be turned off. The high-pitched shriek was incongruous with the size and power of its visual presence. When I asked what the constant complaining was about, Ardakh said it was because the eagle was taken from its nest too young. Even though it was now four years old, it had been denied the parental guidance that is necessary to develop a confident, mature adult eagle. He added that an eagle from the wild that had matured naturally would stay sitting quietly.

• • •

Prior to the Eagle Festival in 2017, I got to know my interpreter, Jane,* fairly well, as she accompanied me during my first round of homestays. Now she was with me for another week. She was a teacher in Ölgii, in her late thirties, married without kids. As I got to know her over the weeks, she confided in me her inability to conceive a child. Various doctors in Ulaanbaatar had examined her, but they could not identify a

reason or suggest a remedy. This had become an enormous weight on her shoulders. Jane told me that in the Kazakh culture, a woman her age without children was regarded as an embarrassment to the family and was even socially shunned by her peers. I thought she must be overstating it. She assured me she wasn't. When our driver, who was also from Ölgii but didn't know Jane before this trip, asked her about her family, she'd felt compelled to tell him that she was the mother of a young daughter.

While staying with Ardakh and his family, Jane mentioned to me that she had heard of a renowned shaman/medicine man who lived somewhere in the area. She desperately wanted to see this shaman. Maybe he could help her find out why she couldn't conceive. The driver refused to take her to find him, saying it wasn't on the client's (meaning my) itinerary. So Jane came to me. I told her to tell the driver that I was very interested in visiting this shaman.

Late that afternoon, we set off over the frozen flatlands in the jeep, with only a few general directions as to where this shaman might be. The day's sun was low, just above the mountain crest, bathing the land with a warm amber wash — a visual effect that greatly belied the actual temperature. Following various directions, we pulled up to three different *gers* and stone-walled hovels and inquired in each as to this shaman's whereabouts. After half an hour of redirection, we arrived at a lonely *ger* positioned on a gentle upward slope at the edge of an open, treeless expanse. The *ger* was Mongolian in design, lower and smaller than the typical Kazakh *ger*. An assortment of stuff lay scattered around the stained white tent.

The driver and I stood by the jeep as Jane knocked on the low wooden door. The man who finally emerged, small in stature and with a quiet demeanour, was the eighty-five-year-old medicine man she was longing to see. His name was Baast.

They quietly talked across the threshold. Baast informed Jane that he wasn't interested in seeing her, explaining that he no longer had the energy to engage in consultations. Jane persisted. After another ten minutes of back-and-forth, the shaman turned and entered the tent. Jane waved the driver and me to follow.

The *ger*'s interior had no heat and nothing to give it any sort

of visual or material comfort. Jane sat down directly in front of Baast and they spoke in low voices. Baast took Jane's right hand and, with her palm face up, placed both his thumbs on her wrist, occasionally mumbling and nodding his head. He went through the same procedure with the driver; for him he prescribed a specific mixture of herbs, saying his liver was damaged and in need of help.

Jane asked the driver to step outside. Only once he left the *ger* did she explain her actual reason for the visit. This time Baast held both her wrists and for several minutes silently nodded his head to the information Jane's blood was sending him. They talked for another fifteen minutes. She gave him a token amount of money for his services, and we left. She told me later that shamans often don't ask for money to do such things.

Since our driver knew a bit of English, Jane waited until we were alone to tell me that the shaman had prescribed an herbal medicine to be taken once a day for two weeks, after which time Baast wanted to see her again. The herb she was to take was very rare, and it wasn't going to be easy to find. Nonetheless, Jane was overjoyed with what she had heard. It was clear that the shaman had lifted her spirits and renewed her hopes.

Before leaving Ölgii, I asked Jane to please keep me updated by email as to how things went. Three weeks after I returned to Canada, Jane wrote saying that her mother had forbidden her to take the herb the shaman had prescribed, although she didn't explain why.

Dotan's Ger, 2017, watercolour, 10.5 x 14 inches

DOTAN

> *For my eagle, hunting is her pleasure . . . when we ride into the mountains, she is always excited to come with me. For my horse? No. For my horse, the hunt is a bore.*
>
> — Beken

Staying with eagle hunters in Mongolia is not quite as far out as it sounds. Bayan-Ölgii has a couple of outfitters, such as Dosjan, who are well acquainted with the area's nomad hunters and their families and know which ones are willing and able to offer tourists reliable accommodation. It's mutually beneficial: Westerners are genuinely interested in the nomads' unusual lives, while the nomads are happy for the extra money that comes from providing room and board and enjoy meeting new people. But Dotan, the last hunter I stayed with, was unaccustomed to boarding Western strangers.

Dotan lived near Rom. He was fifty years old, a tall, ramrod-straight, and good-looking man. He had long sideburns and a serious disposition. He had been an eagle hunter and nomad all his adult life, except during a compulsory stint in the Mongolian military when he was twenty. He went to Ulaanbaatar for his training and service — a place, he told me without a tinge of regret, he hasn't visited since.

His wife, Gulnar, was Dotan's opposite: short, round, and continually smiling, laughing, and bursting with joyfulness.

They had five children: three adult daughters who were either married or on their own, and two sons. One son was grown and lived nearby; the other, Batirjan, was only six. In all likelihood, his arrival was one of those surprises that sometimes happens to middle-aged couples. Regardless of that, or maybe because of it, Batirjan could not have been more loved. Gulnar was unable to set eyes on the little guy without beaming with happiness. Every time he came near, Batirjan was enveloped in his mother's hugs and kisses. Dotan's affection for his son ran deep as well, although his manner was more reserved.

Batirjan, 2018, mixed media, 13 x 13 inches

Dotan had participated in the Eagle Festival, an event he attended every year. His eagle performed fairly well but didn't garner any awards. Like a number of hunters I talked to, Dotan questioned the impartiality of the judging. He reiterated what I'd already heard: the festival's mini-riot was an unfortunate combination of overzealous cops, biased judges, and too much vodka.

I asked how he and his eagle got to the Ölgii festival. He said by horseback. It was 120 kilometres one-way — a 240-kilometre round trip, over snowbound mountain passes, while

toting a big bird on his arm! Dotan said that when it got cold he had a jacket to help keep it warm. He thought one reason he didn't do as well as he might have at the festival was because his eagle caught and ate a rabbit on the way and lost some of her aggressive edge.

In my many conversations with eagle hunters regarding the hunting success, or lack of success, of their eagle, intrigued me. I had read a number of books by Western falconers who said they took on what they perceived to be their eagle's feelings, either dejection or elation, depending on the failure or success of the hunt. But Dotan reaffirmed what I had heard from the other Kazakh hunters: their eagle's success in a hunt was not that important to them. Their pleasure, they said, mostly came from the process of training and establishing a bond with the eagle. They understood that even an experienced eagle in the wild succeeds in only 20 per cent of its attacks.

. . .

In the morning, I woke to see that snow covered the ground from the night before. A few hours later, the sheep and goats that had surrounded Dotan's *ger* during the night were shepherded into the mountains for the day. Close by, two horses and two golden-haired Bactrian camels pawed the soft snow looking for grass to eat. This particular wild two-hump camel is classified as endangered, with less than one thousand in the world. Mongolia is believed to be home to a quarter of them.

The air that I inhaled that morning was as clean and crisp as anywhere on Earth. The new snow on the surrounding peaks accentuated their aura and feeling of inaccessibility. It wasn't hard to understand why these mountains held some sort of ethereal power for the Kazakhs, like Superman's Fortress of Solitude.

I'd thought I left the world of film directors and their camera crews behind once the Eagle Festival ended. Not so. Incredibly, in one of the more isolated places on Earth, below the snow-bound range that separated China from Mongolia, a European film crew was shooting footage of Dotan's brother and his young daughter, half a kilometre from Dotan's *ger*.

I strode over to where the crew was filming, a sketch pad in hand and a camera around my neck. Although nothing was said, I immediately understood that my presence was not exactly welcome, particularly when I started clicking photographs and doing quick sketches of the scene the filmmakers were painstakingly arranging. For whatever reason, I didn't care what they thought.

In the bright morning light, they were attempting to film a very short sequence of the father and daughter on horseback, eagles on their arms, riding hard towards the camera. The pristine panorama of the Alta Mountains formed the backdrop. A simple shot to film? Apparently not.

The pair, decked out in their beautiful fox- and wolf-fur finery, were positioned a hundred metres away. The director shouted and waved for them to start riding forward. Soon after the horses bolted towards them, the director began mumbling and talking to himself and to the guy operating the camera. "No, no, no, no!" he exclaimed in accented English. "I told them . . . What are they doing? What the hell are they doing?"

Father and Daughter, 2018, mixed media, 21 x 14 inches

He shouted them back to the starting point. He waved them to come forward again, as his cinematographer once again started filming. And then in exasperation he mumbled, “No, no, no, no, that’s not what I want.” After shouting more instructions through a translator, he sent them back to do it again. Even when it looked as though everything had gone as planned, it wasn’t exactly what the director had in mind, and they were instructed to do it again and again.

The main problem was that the daughter was only ten years old. It would be hard for almost anyone to control a galloping horse with one hand on the reins and the other balancing a big eagle, let alone a ten-year-old. And the filmmaker insisted that

the riders lift the golden eagles above their heads as they galloped forward. This caused the eagles to spread their wings for balance, supposedly making the whole thing look more heroic, I guess. Of course, this is an action contrived for the camera and not something eagle hunters in the natural course of things would have reason to do. Not surprisingly, the girl simply couldn't control both the galloping horse and a big flapping eagle held over her head. Over and over, either the horse would go veering off course or the eagle would break free and fly out of her control.

After umpteen takes the cinematographer said to the director, "She's too young. Let's use the boy," referring to the girl's older brother.

"No, no, I like the girl, the girl's better."

I understood why the director wanted to stick with the daughter. The international success of *The Eagle Huntress* made thirteen-year old Aisholpan probably the most famous Mongolian in the world, at least for now. She is a role model for all young Kazakh girls, and probably for thousands of girls elsewhere, too. This hasn't gone unnoticed by other eagle-hunting parents with young daughters, who are now aware of a previously unrealized economic resource. And from the other side of the camera, as demonstrated at the Eagle Festival, the success of Aisholpan's movie has motivated a host of other documentary filmmakers. I couldn't blame them. A brutal and remote mountain setting, an apex predator and its strange bond with youthful innocence — it's practically the stuff of mythic lore, or a parable from an ancient legend.

. . .

After my multiple stays over two seasons with the Kazakh nomads of Bayan-Ölgii, I figured I had grasped the measure of their resilient toughness. But after being with Dotan and his family, I had to recalibrate my already deep respect for these people. Speaking as a lifelong inhabitant of a cold climate, I knew what winter looked like, and at Dotan's home, from what I saw and felt, yeah, this was winter. Yet for Dotan, who said he preferred living in a *ger* to a house, this wasn't winter at all. He said they would move to their winter dwelling sometime

later in November, when it got cold.

I had my own four-season sleeping bag and supplemented it with an added layer of their heavy Kazakh blankets — and I needed it all. Sleeping soundly at those temperatures inside Dotan's *ger* happened only if I took care to trap and preserve every minute bit of body heat. Apart from the freezing cold, their ancient beds of chain-link wire were so old and loose as to be essentially wire-mesh hammocks. Mine sagged so much that my butt practically touched the floor. The felt-lined *ger* didn't hold any heat, as there wasn't any heat to hold. It did, however, muffle the sound of the lashing snow squall happening a foot from my head.

In the morning, Gulnar was always the first up. She cleaned out the day-old ashes from the cold stove and then built a new fire with a pile of dry dung. By nine, most people were up and dressed, although everybody pretty much stayed clothed when they went to bed. From the outside a rope pulled open the flap around the stovepipe, which was the only source of interior light if the outside door was closed.

Animal dung burns hot. But it also burns fast, and perhaps because it does, it lacks the penetrating warmth of wood heat. To get warm I had to stand very close to the little stove and rotate, like a chicken on a rotisserie. A stove full of dung would last forty minutes at the most. When heat was required for cooking, making tea, or getting warm, a new fire had to be stoked or restarted. This fire-starting happened half a dozen times a day. The dung produced a lot more ashes than wood, and the stove box had to be cleaned out daily.

Another way to get warm was to take a turn at the butter churner. This butter-making process involved pouring milk into a large leather bag cinched loosely at the top, with a long-handled plunger sticking out. Then it's many hours of plunging up and down to churn milk into butter. The high elevation where Dotan's family lived made it an exceptionally exhausting exercise. To help produce body heat, I decided to make this part of my morning ritual, at least for a few minutes. In time, after everyone took multiple turns, including six-year-old Batirjan, the milk stiffened into butter.

CULTURAL CHASM

We have created a Star Wars civilization, with Stone Age emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology.
— E.O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth*

In the past, a nomadic mother and a father raised their children with the understanding that their job as parents was to pass on what they knew and how to do a host of things. Generation after generation after generation, this was the primary means by which youth gained the knowledge to survive on the steppes of Central Asia as adults. And there was lots to learn: how to fashion a fur into a warm garment, how to track and hunt a wild animal, cook a meal, churn butter, construct a *ger*, ride a horse, obtain and train a golden eagle, and all the nuances of animal husbandry. These skills, honed over a thousand years, were diligently passed down from parent to child. An especially gifted child might push the boundaries of this knowledge and succeed in life beyond the limits and expectations of the parents — or it could go the other way, with the offspring unable to match the parents' abilities.

Today, things have changed. Children, not just in Mongolia but almost everywhere, are learning and doing all kinds of things that they haven't learned from their parents. Thanks to standardized, publicly funded education and the ongoing migration of people to large urban centres, children are comfortable with ideas and innovations that their mothers and fathers have little knowledge of. Over the last few generations, as digital technology and its related systems have become more pervasive and complex, the gulf between a parent's baseline of knowledge and that of the child has grown wider.

Young Nomad, 2017, mixed media, 13 x 16 inches

As with many hunter-gatherer and nomadic societies in the world today, the Kazakh eagle hunters have read the writing on the wall. I believe they know their way of life is well outside the norm, if not at the edge of disappearing. Each of the hunters I was with lamented the fact that most of their children lacked their parents' interest in eagle hunting. "We have our freedom. We live simply. Life is not that bad," Beken said. "We need knowledge of the world as it is now. If [my son] says he is going to school far away and he is not going to become an eagle hunter I cannot tell him otherwise. It's hard for me to tell him to become an eagle hunter like myself and his ancestors."

The story was the same with all the eagle hunters' children: a lack of interest in their culture's age-old customs. Although on the surface enthusiasm for eagle hunting appears renewed, as witnessed at the Eagle Festival, I was repeatedly told that most young people obtain eagles because it looks cool. But they don't, as a rule, put in the time, care, and effort needed to bond, train, and hunt with the bird.

Although the nomadic traditions that I observed on the steppes appeared unchanged, a grand transition is taking place. All over the world, people who once lived as hunter/gathers, pastoralists, and farmers have abandoned the land and are becoming part of the homogenized melting pot of urban life. This migratory shift to the city is not new, but lately it's been

accelerating, exacerbated by globalization, the need for an education, climate change, consumerism, and economic and political pressures.

I observed and wrote about this issue in other places that I've travelled. High in the central Himalaya, in the early 2000s, I watched two young men and their families transition from nomadic pastoralism at fourteen thousand feet to inner-city life. Once an integral part of the Ladakh's Kharnakpa tribe, I revisited them a year after their move to the city of Leh. In my book *Wild Places, Wild Hearts: Nomads of the Himalaya,* I wrote the following:

> Lobsang was also trying to adapt to another reality. Everything he or his family did in the city cost money. That fact would appear obvious to most people, but it was a shock for every Changpa [nomad] family moving from a nomadic, self-sufficient, trade-and-bartering society to a society functioning completely on cash. His horses, his means of transportation, were gone. Now transport, housing, meat, dairy products, fuel, carpets, blankets, and clothes, all of which had been self-generated in Kharnak [their nomadic territory], were obtained only with cash.[45]

In 1991, in the district of Ammassalik in East Greenland, in one of the most isolated places on Earth, again I witnessed the remnants of an ancient kayak-hunting culture in the process of disappearing. I wrote about it in my book *The Memory of Water:*

> All Inuit have been having to adjust to vast cultural changes, but nowhere in the Arctic have these shifts been happening so quickly as in Eastern Greenland. The people there are struggling through a seismic transition — from what was effectively a nomadic, sea hunting culture to the postmodern world. And this transition is only two or three generations old. They're being asked to leave behind a thousand-year-old tradition and grab on to a fast-paced world with a radically different economy, technology, and social and spiritual values. It's as if they have been asked to

hop a speeding passenger train.[46]

During and immediately after such a seismic cultural shift, whether in Ladakh, East Greenland or west Mongolia, a number of social pathologies often emerge. It starts with a growing appetite for consumer products and then an erosion of long-held traditions and abandonment of culturally honed skills. A lack of work leads to diminished feelings of self-worth. Depression, substance and spousal abuse, mental illness, and child neglect and criminality can follow, particularly for the generations caught in the transition.

The Mongolian nomads — Beken, Tenelhan, Kenjebek, Rom, Leikhan, Ardakh, Dotan, and the others — understand the importance of education. Boarding schools in small villages have become an accepted fact of life. Some watch proudly as their grown children move to Ulaanbaatar to further their education and find employment. In my conversations with the Kazakh nomads, some wondered aloud if animal herding and formal education were mutually exclusive. Most left it as an open question, but I think inwardly they knew the answer. Once educated and having gained an employable skill, it's highly unlikely that a young person will return to the *gers* of Bayan-Ölgii to herd animals and hunt with eagles.

When crossing this Rubicon, these young people will leave behind a way of life a hundred generations old, being perhaps the first of their family to do so. They then have the daunting task of transitioning from the self-sufficiency of nomadism into the maelstrom of modernity and, in doing so, trying to sidestep a life inside Ulaanbaatar's *ger* ghetto.

It is ironic that at the same time that the Kazakhs' traditional way of life is under serious threat, filmmakers, photographers, writers, and tourists from the outside world are enthusiastically coming to western Mongolia to marvel, applaud, and document their eagle-hunting culture.

. . .

As we waited for the water to boil inside Dotan's *ger*, the little breakfast table was set with bowls for tea, along with the usual fried bread and creamy butter. On the floor, Batirjan played

quietly. The sum total of his toys was a tiny wind-up motorcycle about five centimetres long and five plastic animals that stood about ten centimetres high. He had a giraffe, tiger, leopard, rhino, and horse. He favoured the horse; his handling had worn off most of its colour and one of its hind legs was missing. To help it stand, Batirjan would place the other animals on either side of the horse for support.

Typically, Batirjan would be at boarding school in a small town, eight kilometres away. Dotan took him to school by horseback or motor scooter. Today, however, he wasn't feeling well and had stayed home. The school's classroom is a small *ger*. The children board in an adjoining *ger* during the week. In the coldest months of the year the school was closed.

At breakfast, sunlight streamed in through the roof's opening and bathed the interior in a wonderful visual warmth. Small sparrows, chickadees, and finches entered the *ger* through the overhead opening. These regular morning visitors flitted among us, looking for breadcrumbs and bits of curd. Later in the morning, snowflakes quietly floated down through the opening. All around us they sparkled and shimmered in the sunlight as they slowly descended into the *ger's* darkness, as if delivered from the heavens by a magician's wand.

When the morning sun had finished melting the ground cover of snow, Batirjan got dressed and went outside. Even though he wasn't feeling 100 per cent, he commenced one of his household chores, which involved gathering up the sheep dung scattered around the *ger* from the night before.

Working without help or supervision, the six-year-old formed the dung pellets into piles then scooped them up into a pot that he emptied into a large plastic sack that was almost his height. When the sack was full he dragged it over to the entrance at the *ger*'s south side. Dotan's huge female eagle perched next to the sack of dung, and beside her, a mottled-brown saker falcon about the size of a crow. Both birds sat quietly hooded and waiting. Dotan told me the falcon was for Batirjan. He said the diminutive raptor was suitable for hunting small game like gerbils and mice. He saw it as the first step in his son's training to be an eagle hunter.

Later that evening I asked Dotan if he would prefer to see Batirjan become a nomad and eagle hunter like himself, or,

with an education, find a good job in Ulaanbaatar. Without hesitation, he told me he would prefer for him to stay in Bayan-Ölgii and be an eagle hunter. He looked across the *ger* at his son playing with his toy animals on the floor. After a long pause, he added that his role as a parent was to prepare his son for either path, so he could choose.

---

* Not her real name.

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My artwork in this book was studio based, referencing my photographs, and my onsite drawings and watercolours. The works on paper described as mixed media, combine a combination of various materials and techniques: arches watercolour paper, watercolour, rice paper, mulberry paper, felt, linen, etching, chine collé (Chinese collage), graphite pencil, gold leaf, charcoal pencil, block printing, and modelling gesso. The oil paintings were painted on cotton canvas, using, at times, a modelling gesso as a

ground.

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Allen Smutylo’s work as a writer and artist is informed by his experience of travelling and living in some of the most remote places of the world.

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